

Halo: Civil War

by CII

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Summary: The fixed version. Telek 'Heros must find a way to put an end to the Sangheili Civil War against the Neru Pe 'Odosima. And he enlists the one person that might shed some light about the truth of the Forerunners, the Precursor Emperor himself. Yes, this also has Mass Effect elements in it.

1. I

****1220, August 21, 2560 (Military time)\unknown location****

It was dark. He could smell the stale air, taste the stillness. The dimly lit, metallic purple and blue corridor was eerily silent. Aroh 'Evob roved his black eyes around as he and his Spec Ops warriors made their way down the passage. The only sounds they could hear was the soft click-clack of their shoes upon the metallic floor and an idle hiss from a coolant tube running along the ceiling above them. The Super-Carrier _Silent Wrath _was disabled, abandoned, sent to drift the void vacuum of space.

Easy pickings for Covenant Remnant, _Neru Pe 'Odosima_ and their faithful followers.

This ship once belonged to the Fleet Shadow of Fury, a specially designed fleet of cloaking ships from Sanghelios, using upgraded technology. Its Supreme Commander was Telek Nar 'Heros, a leader that Spec Ops Commander Aroh 'Evob regarded with disgust. This ship was given to Telek by Imperial Admiral Xytan Jar 'Wattinr to replaced his damaged _Shadow of Darkness_. And when Telek took his other ship back, he gave the _Silent Wrath _to his disgusting human subordinate, Shipmaster Tomas Jimenez.

The _Pious Reckoning_, a _Reverence-_class battle cruiser and the ship Aroh and his Special Forces served upon was able to diligently disable the titanic super carrier. It seemed like a coward, Shipmaster Tomas and his human filth had vacated the ship, fearing

capture. Shipmaster Yurgo 'Tizswad scanned for any signs of the other ships in the fleet, knowing that Telek was infamous for his ambushing attacks. Telek used his ships' cloaking advantage to hide and allow one ship to appear to be helpless as bait for his trap. The elder Sangheili military leader had used such tactics before when he betrayed the glory of the Covenant and came into the service of the wretched humans of the United Nations Space Command. It was a way for Telek to capture Covenant ships and deliver them to the UNSC, which helped turn the tide of the war in the humans' favor.

Shipmaster Yurgo, upon coming across the disabled _Silent Wrath_, wondered if this was such a trap. With some help of newly acclimated Sangheili engineers, his ship was outfitted with a way to sniff out a cloaked Sangheili ship. Cloaked ships produced an enormous amount of heat, creating a beaming black body radioactive signature against the cold background. Not as hard as a star, but considering most of space was nearing the temperatures of absolute zero, creating a heat source only a hundred degrees above that would cause the sensors to excite. So far, so good, there were no cloaked ships around the _Wrath_. The super carrier was alone.

Aroh and his warriors continued their trek through the corridor, making their way up to the bridge of the ship, right at its heart. Behind them was engineering, its repulsor engines quiet. Most of the power was cut off, save for life support. Overhead lights lining the walls flickered slightly, ever so no and then he heard an electronic hum from the lights as he made his way down. His plasma sword scraped against the floor, leaving a hot, burning gash along the metallic plating.

Nearly twenty miles of super carrier did they trek through and so far, no sign of Shipmaster Tomas or his mixed crew of humans and heretic Sangheili.

"They truly did abandon this wonderful ship, Excellency," said a black-armored Sangheili.

"Cowards," said Aroh, his black, shiny eyes narrowing under his pearly-white helm. "At least die like warriors instead of fleeing."

The communications array buzzed in his ear-hole and he looked toward the ceiling.

"Is there any trace of the heretics?"

"No, Shipmaster," Aroh replied. "None. They have abandoned the ship."

_"My readings would have sensed any escaping craft from the _Silent Wrath_,_" _began Yurgo. _"I do not believe they left."_

"Then, where are they?" asked Aroh.

_"Hiding," _said Yurgo. _"Flush them out."_

"Gladly."

"Excellency," began another warrior. "Once we have control of the bridge, we could just open all the airlocks. Seal off the bridge and

watch everything in the ship be swept out into space."

Aroh turned to the shorter Sangheili and dipped his head, his mandibles clacking.

"Then, let us swiftly get to the bridge before whoever is left on this ship gets wind of our plan," he said.

He heard his fellow warriors bark in agreement. They started in a swift trot down the corridor, winding their way through each bend and turn. The lights continued to flicker, but that did little to hinder their way. They crossed up an elevator, hovered over a light bridge, and then finally came to the heart of the ship itself. The doors chimed softly, the tri-valve panels opening up with a flicker of blue lights. Aroh gripped his sword hilt tightly, sniffing the air as he turned his head. The bridge of the ship was truly a massive sight to behold. Before him was a great, many pane window looking out over the starry-spans and soft rolling of an orange nebula. Purple and red glowing holographic controls beamed brightly. They were still operational. Columns of purple and blue, bulbous shapes connected from the ceiling to the floor with cyan lights zipping up between the spaces in the paneling. He had never been on the bridge of a super carrier before. To have control of a ship like this would indeed be a great help to the Covenant Remnant and their continued service to their one true gods, the Forerunners. A ship like this was more than capable of glassing planets, showing the true might of the former Covenant which he held so dearly. If it was not for the heresy of Telek and his mentor Otto, the current Arbiter, the Covenant would not have fallen into the state it is now.

He cursed Telek for spreading his lies to the Council, making them the weak, pathetic, un-piteous, sycophants they were now. Sanghelios became a world of sin and debauchery due to Telek's preaching that the Forerunners were not gods, and the religion that the Sangheili held for thousands of years, even before the Covenant, was nothing more than a foolish lie. It was up to the Covenant Remnant to remind the Sangheili the truth and Aroh prayed each night that the gods would finally smite Telek where he stood for his blasphemy.

"Alright," began Aroh. "Joba, get to the controls and seal off this level."

"Yes, Excellency," said Joba, saluting with a fist to his chest. He swiftly flowed down the ramp to one of the tactical controls, his gloved fingers flying across the hard-light screens.

"Gonu," Aroh began. "Man the controls for the airlock mechanisms. Once we have this place sealed off, you open them up."

"Yes, Excellency, said Gonu as he dipped his head and parted.

"The rest of you, keep an eye on the door," he said. "I want no mistakes."

His other men barked in compliance. Aroh slowly walked down the ramp towards the center of the bridge. He heard the chiming clicks of Joba and Gonu as they tapped their fingers across the controls, commanding the ship to begin sealing off the levels and opening up the airlocks. A grin of satisfaction spread across his mandibles, a fang peeking

out between the scaly, ashen lips.

"This ship is ours now," he said deeply.

He heard a hiss coming from the wall as he made his way to the command chair. Aroh looked up to see a spray of gray blue mist flowing out from one of the piping along the ceiling. The mist was like the others he saw as he made his way up towards the ship. At first, he thought nothing of it, but now, he began to wonder. The mist billowed out unnaturally, looking like it was taking shape as something. Wispy fingers reached out to trace the grooves of the floor and he heard something large sigh. His twin hearts fluttered against the ribcage of his chest and he slowly backed away.

"Demon?" he whispered.

The mist hissed at him, flowing out around the floor, clouds churning and rolling. Aroh watched as the mist crept close to his warriors. He stepped forward, raising a hand to them as the cloud reared back and snatched his warriors up. His eyes widened, his mandibles spread, silent shock spreading across his face. Plasma fire lit up the smoke and he heard his warriors scream in the mist.

Gonu and Joba backed away from the controls, looking upwards upon the strange gray mist. The trailing edge passed on, flowing down the ramp. Aroh backed away, his eyes sparking in horror as he saw what had become of his warriors. They looked like nothing more than frozen statues, ice dripping from their bodies like frosty daggers. He dropped his sword, the plasma blade shattering like glass in a spark of blue-white.

"What is it?" Gonu asked. "What happened to them?"

"It's a demon!" Joba called. "A monster infesting this ship!"

He heard that Telek had some sort of demonic creature upon his ship, a creature that took the form of some sort of cold mist, a ghostly apparition that seemed to come from every Sangheili nightmare. And Telek had it under his command. Truly, it was a sign of his own blasphemous madness, to ally himself with such a devil. And it was here! It was on this ship! No weapon could defeat it. Gonu fired upon the strange swirling mist, the plasma bolts of his rifle passing through nothing, igniting as it hit the back wall.

"Foul beast!" he called.

The cloud crept closer to him, ghostly talons lashed out from its surface. Gonu yelped as he felt himself being dragged into the cloud by its cold tendrils. Joba dropped his rifle and backed away, his golden eyes trembling with fear.

"Stand your ground, warrior!" Aroh called.

"How can we fight something our weapons do not harm?" Joba asked as he watched the cloud sweep away from Gonu's now frozen body.

"To run from our enemy only to save ourselves is the coward's way out!" said Aroh.

Is that so?

Aroh's eyes widened, hearing the icy voice of the mist demon crackle inside of his mind. The mist flowed over Joba's body at last, encasing him as a frozen statue as well, frozen forever in fear.

"Telek cannot even come and face me!" said Aroh. "He sends his demon to me instead!"

I am no demon.

The cloud swirled around him. He heard the sound of a metallic bang upon the doors to the bridge. Aroh's eyes narrowed as a flash of blue-white exploded and the doors peeled back like a banana. His breath stilled as a figure came through, a human figure, rather short even by human standards. He was dressed in a UNSC officers' uniform, drab gray with the insignia of his command upon his shoulder. In his right hand was a quarter staff of blue-white energy, held low as if he was going to use it like a sword. His eyes glowed blue and a trail of ghostly cyan cords flowed out from the back of his spiky, black hair. A pair of triangular, black markings curved around his cheeks. Behind him walked up a tall, statuesque Sangheili Zealot, dressed in brilliant gold armor and crating a Fuel Rod Gun across his back. A pair of pale green eyes regarded Aroh with a smug "got you!".

Aroh bolted away from the cloud, starting to run up the ramp. The human swung the energy sword in his hand, tossing it into Aroh's path. In a flash of white, ear-ringing explosion, the Sangheili Spec Ops Commander was thrown to his back. The Zealot leapt over the ramp and dashed towards Aroh, snatching his neck up in a huge hand. The human walked down, followed by a mixed platoon of other UNSC soldiers and Sangheili warriors. Aroh looked beyond the Zealot to the frosty mist who then started to take form. The mist bubbled up, massive leathery, ghostly wings formed, then a large, reptilian head, tail, and body formed. The creature was silvery in color with blue stripes running down its back.

Several Sangheili who were with the humans rushed to the controls, closing the airlocks and filling the closed off sections with life support and oxygen again.

"Heretics!" Aroh called, speaking in the language of the Sangheili. "All of you!"

The Zealot huffed and slammed the butt of his cannon upon the Spec Ops Commander's head. Like a heavy stone, Aroh fell over.

"Nice work, Dovi."

Tomas Jimenez, Captain of the _Silent Wrath_, smiled as he allowed his mind to make the Disconnection. The cords disappeared, the markings disappeared and Tom felt a great pressure upon his mind suddenly released. He had practiced every day since Telek ordered him to start using the Array again just in case an issue like this were to arise. Humans wielding Technomancy brought fear to the religious fundamentalists of the Servants of Abiding Truth. Telek risked that seeing such abilities would not bode well for his or Otto's gamble in preaching that the Forerunners were nothing more than just super-advanced aliens who made the biggest mistake of their existence, and it would frighten more Sangheili to follow in the

Covenant Remnant's political stature. However, it was necessary. Telek hoped that having the other Sangheili see humans, who were once thought of as worthless parasites only fit for genocidal annihilation by the Covenant, wield the power of their gods with ease—and these fundamentalists would change their minds and finally take the medicine they need desperately to take. However, Tom had to admit to himself, he did not wield the power of Technomancy with any ease, it was more like rampaging bull in a china store. Kiryuu Knight, Soñador Malcho, or Tim Marx, aka Manda, would be more apt to use the abilities with far more grace than he could ever hope. In fact, Telek's new 'squire' as he jokingly referred to him, Chandler Graham, was a better student at Technomancy than Tom was. He already had two pairs of markings upon his face each time he Connected, where as Tom could barely maintain one pair.

Still the results were awesome. Tom could fire off energy blasts like he was a character from a Japanese anime, or form one of those energy balls into a glowing sword, one of the more basic abilities Technomancers learn. Even then, the sword had its limits, good use as a melee weapon, but unless the wielder had good defense as well as offense, even Technomancy could not protect him. Still, the look on the invading Sangheili's face was worth it to have the sword out. However, he was more frightened by the ghostly apparition of Dunkelzahn Mountainshadow, Great Western Dragon and former President proceeding Kiryuu Knight. Though now the UNSC had seen two other presidents go by in these last seven years since the ending of the Covenant/Human War, one still in office now, Geraldo Mendoza.

Tom looked to Dovi 'Canthon, the big Zealot giving two thumbs up, from both thumbs of his hands. Tom had to laugh when Dovi did that. The Zealot Field Master was on lone from Shipmaster Cujo's ship and Tom couldn't be more grateful than to have him on board.

"I'm sure the Shipmaster of that battle cruiser would like to know what's going on," said Dovi, placing the split of his mandibles together. It was an ease way for the Sangheili to speak any human language, making their mandibles form into the upper and lower jaws similar to that of a human. The Sangheili who worked closely with Telek each mastered this ability. It almost made them look like they just had a simple mouth lined with rows of fangs. Dovi leaned over and hefted Aroh up. He winced when he heard a shatter, turning to see one of his own warriors poke at the frozen statues of the other invaders. The Spec Ops Sangheili fell apart, cracking like glass and tumbling to the ground. Dovi turned back to Dunkelzahn, tilting his head. "Remind me never to have you touch me, Casper."

_I hate it when people call me that, _said Dunkelzahn. He shrank back when he looked into Dovi's pale gaze. _I won't touch you, Field Master._

_"Tom!"_called a gruff voice over the comlink. The voice was laced with a Southern American Accent. However, no one would hardly think it actually came from a Sangheili. _"Tom, please tell me you're still kickin'."_

"I'm here, Telek," said Tom.

_"Thank my Aunt Evira's petty coat you're alright!" _said Telek.
_"Tom, Chandler can't keep the field up for much longer around my fleet. He's ready to send Shri and her Sangheili over to that battle

cruiser in order to capture their Shipmaster. You have got to stall them!"_

"Don't worry, Tom out!" said Tom. As the comlink clicked off, he turned back to Dovi. "Wake him up."

Dovi chuckled deeply, cracking his knuckles.

"Don't break his limbs!" Tom said, knowing what that meant.

"I will try to be composed, Shipmaster," said Dovi. He raised an eyebrow. "But I make no promises."

He gave Aroh a good smacking to both cheeks with the back of his gloved hand, waking the fundamentalist Sangheili up. Aroh jostled, gasping for air as his black eyes flickered open. Tom leaned down to him, a smile appearing upon his face. Tom haunched over, coming to his knees as he stared upon the Sangheili.

"You are going to send a word to your Shipmaster to hold his position," he began. "That your are still securing the ship."

"Nishum!" Aroh said with a spat, a ring of saliva spilling out over his mandibles.

Dovi gave him a good punch in the upper arm: "Ni'jafla!" He switched back to English. "Now speak the human's language."

"Very well," said Aroh. His English sounded slurred, having great difficulties even pronouncing his 'V's or 'W's. "You want me to tell Shipmaster I secured ship, human?"

"Yeah, that's it," said Tom.

"Unless you want your head blown off, I suggest you do as he said," said Dovi.

Aroh barked in disgust and then tapped his armored chest.

"Shipmaster," he began, speaking in his native tongue. "I have secured the ship. No survivors."

_"Well done," _began Yurgo. _"Well done. Take control of the ship. We will prepare to make the jump to Laqil."_

"Yes, Excellency," said Aroh. "Just give me time to prep the ship for the jump. Hold your position until we're ready to move the ship."

_"Contact me when you are ready, Commander," _said Yurgo.

"Yes, sir."

As the comlink went dead, Aroh looked to his captors, taking a deep breath. Tom walked around the Sangheili, his arms crossed again. Aroh watched Tom carefully.

"Whereâ€"where is fleet?" he asked in English.

"Hidden," said Tom. "Some tricks that we know. A lot better than just cloaking a ship."

"The godsâ€ teach you those tricks?" asked Aroh.

"No," said Tom. "The gods of the gods taught us these tricks."

Aroh leaned over, dipping his head between his legs. Tom returned his call back to Telek.

"Okay, Tel, do your thing," he said.

_"Alright," _said Telek. _"Moving the _Shadow_ into position now and we are going to snatch that battle cruiser up. I've got Shri and her team ready as well. Did you get where the ship makes berth?"_

"Laqil," said Tom.

_"Good work," _said Telek._ "Keep our prisoner aliveâ€ for now."_

"Yes, sir," he said.

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Shri 'Canthon, one of the very few female Sangheili who joined up with the military during the Covenant War, was the Special Operations Commander on board Telek Nar 'Heros' cloaking super carrier, the _Shadow of Darkness_. _She had been with Telek for almost 20 years, starting when they both were a part of the Covenant. Shri often was looked on by many of the other Sangheili as a mother figure and she made sure every single one of them were taken care of. Her brother was Dovi 'Canthon, and both were allowed to become swordsmen due to their father being an aristocrat himself. They had two different mothers, though. However, she would defend him like a mama bear, as many humans on board Telek's ship. No one hurts her brother. But, she had no worries now, Dovi was good hands with Tom, another dear friend of hers she met when she followed Telek in defecting from the Covenant. Shri gave a good knock to her pearly white helm for good luck, her pale green eyes twinkled.

"Alright," she said, looking back at her team. At her side was a black armored Sangheili with hazel eyes and an equally smug grin. "We ready, Ysoa?"

"Ready as ever, Shri," said Ysoa 'Argam.

Shri turned as she heard two rumbles as two heavily armored Lekgolo walk towards them. They bowed their armored heads and rumbled in greeting to her. Though many humans could not understand what they were saying, Shri knew exactly what they said. Shri dipped her head in kind.

"Okay," she said. "Yvette, we're ready."

She turned to a human with red hair, dressed in a UNSC marine uniform. Glowing cords draped over her back. She was a teleportation specialist, snapping her fingers as glowing golden rings wrapped

around herself and the Special Forces traveling with her. They vanished from the cargo bay of the ship only to reappear inside the Pious Reckoning cargo bay. Shri ignited her plasma sword as Ysoa pulled out his carbine. Yvette got out her assault rifle.

Around them, Sangheili and Unggoy and Jiralhanae all loyal to this new faction of fundamentalists were waiting for them, scattered about dark blue crates and one Wraith Tank. A flair of blue arced its way over the crates. Shri and Ysoa leapt out of the way as crates exploded behind them in a mist of cyan and purple. Bolts of blue and green flashed between them. Carbon scoring dotted the purple walls. Shri pressed a glowing panel in her frosty armor and suddenly vanished. She swept behind a dark blue-armored Sangheili, her sword flashed through his chest. She heard a choking call from him as he dropped. The Lekgolo tossed around bodies of enemy Sangheili and Unggoy. Explosions of green ignited from their cannons attached to their right arms. Ysoa heard the doors chime and more enemy forces spilled out as the doors slowly swept open.

Shri felt the ship shudder and she heard the sound of a loud wale of a siren. She looked up and grinned slightly as she heard the barking commands from the Shipmaster over the intercom. It was now clear to her he knew what was happening and Telek had made his move.

"We have to get to the bridge, now!" she called to Ysoa.

Ysoa looked over a crate, seeing Yvette leap through a wall. Golden ripples spread out from the wall as if the human had dove into still, dark water. Ysoa felt a hand reach out, taking hold of his armor's collar. The hand yanked him straight into the wall. The scene itself wiped away as if he dove through murky blackness, only to come out into a corridor at the other end. He fell forward, spilling out into the steely colored floor. A gloved hand reached out to him, spreading five fingers. Ysoa took hold and pulled himself up.

"You alright, lieutenant?" Yvette asked, giving the Sangheili a pat upon his shoulder.

"Yeah," he said. Ysoa looked behind him only to see Shri phase through the wall as well, acting as this was something she has done most of her life.

She lifted a hand to her ear, calling up her other troops.

"Keep the cargo bay guarded," she said. "That's our point of entry. We'll take down the Shipmaster."

"We've got company, Shri!" Ysoa said.

Spilling out into the corridor were Sangheili and Jiralhanae, pausing to hide behind their deployable shielding. A bubble of shear blue-white formed around Shri, Ysoa, and Yvette. Plasma bolts of red, purple, and blue impacted upon the fluctuating shield, pelting it with tiny ripples like hail stones into a pond. Yvette held her hands out, holding the shield around them. And there they remained until each of their attackers guns overheated. Shri heard the familiar hiss of the overheating riffles and pistols, green, red, blue mists escaping from their barrels. The Jiralhanae and Sangheili fanned their weapons, desperately trying to help them cool down for another shot.

"Yvette," began Shri.

"Yes, ma'am," said the Technomancer. She thrust a fist forward and the bubble formed into a shockwave of blue-white, racing forth down the corridor. Sparks off the edges of the wave ignited and trickled up and down the metallic walls, frying the exposed alien circuitry. As the wave washed over their enemies, the deployed shielding sparked and popped, only to flash off, completely disabled. The wave fried the circuitry in their armor, their weapons and knocking them back to the ground. Shri and Ysoa ran up along the angular walls, circling and crossing upon the ceiling. Both Sangheili Spec Ops pulled out the UNSC rocket launchers tied to their backs, slinging them upon their shoulders and fired. The corridor filled in an explosion of fiery orange and red blaze, and black smoke. As the smoke cleared, all that was left were the charred bodies of Sangheili and Jiralhanae littering the blackened surfaces of the corridor. Shri and Ysoa flipped down from the ceiling and the three started bolting swiftly down, rounding a bend in the corridor.

"We're not far from the bridge," said Shri.

The speed of a finely toned Sangheili was nearly unmatched by a human. Naturally, Elites were the better sprinters and runners due to their digigrade legs. However, Yvette had a way of solving that issue. Shri looked behind her, seeing the Technomancer skate along the metallic floor behind them with bolts of blue-white propelling her forward, blasting off from her heels.

"Shri!" _she heard the sound of Telek's gruff voice through her comlink.

"What?" she asked.

"Hurry!" _he said. _"I've sent a disabling pulse through the weapon system on the ship, but, it won't be long before their Huragoks fix it. I want that Shipmaster captured!"_

"We're moving as fast as we can, Telek," said Shri.

"Yah ain't fast enough," _said Telek. _"You better be moving as if your asses were on fire!"_

Shri clacked her mandibles and let loose a deep grunt: "We're going as fast as we can! Shri, out!"

"Telek's getting impatient?" Ysoa asked, gasping in between his words as they ran.

"Yeah, he is," Shri replied. She looked back behind her to Yvette, noticing the strain upon her face, her furrowed brow. "How are you holding?"

Yvette looked down upon her wrist watch: "I have nine minutes left before it starts hurting. Another two minutes before I start bleeding out of my nose and ears."

"Don't worry, we'll capture this ship before the seizures hit," said Ysoa. "Just hang in there, Yvette."

"Thanks, lieutenant," she said. "I can speed things up, Commander."

Shri slowed her pace as they braced themselves against a wall between the corner. She heard the sound of Sangheili and Jiralhanae grunting and growling, firing upon them again. Flashes of blue, cyan, and green whirled by them.

"How?" she asked, turning her head to Yvette, her pale green eyes locking upon her glowing blue ones.

"Tell me," she began. "In what direction is the bridge?"

"We have to go across a launching bay," Shri replied.

"No, in what direction," said Yvette. "Is the bridgeâ€"through the dimensionâ€"which direction?"

Shri closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath. A slight prick grazed upon her neck. The Sangheili opened her eyes, glowing as brightly blue as Yvette's. Shri rose to her feet, and lifted her left hand, holding her palm flat out, parallel to the wall opposite to her. She slowly turned to the wall, breathing slowly, concentrating upon the wall.

****_Just allow it to open...do not fight it, Shri..._****

The wall rippled as if she was touching its liquid-metallic surface. She turned her wrist and the wall seemed to open up, peeling back, bulkhead by bulkhead. She took in another deep breath and thrust her hand out as if she was punching a hole through space itself. The force of her fist broke each bulkhead, opening them up in a long tunnel, one after another, until the bridge shifted and bent, dragging itself to them in a wavy motion. Yvette grabbed both Shri and Ysoa, bounding through the tunnel. She heard the sound of each metallic plate creaking, closing behind them, piece by piece. One after another, the three landed hard upon the bridge of the ship, rolling as they hit. Finally, the last metallic wall closed behind them, sealing them in with the Shipmaster and his guards and bridge personnel. The Shipmaster Yurgo stood upon the raised platform, amid a semi circle of holographic screens lit in blue, cyan, purple, and red. His golden armor glittered in the low light. Blood red-armored Major Domos stood, poised and ready to attack the intruders, gripping their weapons tightly.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Yurgo shouted, seeing the three intruders fall through the wall.

The glow of Shri's eyes faded as Yvette pulled her cords away from the Sangheili's neck.

"Heretics!" Yurgo said. "I will have all your heads planted firmly upon pikes in Mdama Keep!"

"You'll have to take them first," said Shri.

"Kill them!" Yurgo called.

Yvette raised her hands, forming her shield around her and Shri and Ysoa just as the Sangheili fired upon them. Shri ignited her sword

and Yurgo followed as well, igniting his. Just as she was about to leap out of the shield, she saw it flicker around her, weakening. The sound of a watch alarm beeping caught her ears and Shri turned back around to Yvette. The human was crying out in pain, her face twisted in agony. Shri could smell the metallic stench of Yvette's blood as it started to leak out. Her body was frozen, trembling. The shield fell, shattering like several thousand points of lights, falling all around her and skidding upon the metallic floor. Yvette fell over and Ysoa caught her into his large arms.

"Disconnect!" Shri called.

Yvette's cords vanished and her eyes returned to their natural dark brown color. She curled up into Ysoa's arms. The black-armored Sangheili looked up at his superior officer, his eyes showing their worry. Yurgo chuckled.

"So this is the human's mastery over the gods' magic?" he asked. "Pathetic that they are merely hurt by it!"

"You have no idea what sort of 'magic' it really is," said Shri.

"You have no where to run, female," said Yurgo. "No where to hide!"

As each of the Sangheili guards approached them, Shri saw a flash of brilliant white. Five of the Major Domos shook violently as bolts of lightning forked in between them. Shri looked on as a flash of cyan blinded her and she saw one of the Major Domo guards step forward. His torso peeled away, toppling over, half and half, in a bloody, purple mess. A shape came into view, the background he hid inside of folding away from his body as he released his cloak. There, standing in deep purple-black armor, shining metallic and defiant, glowing cyan designs etched upon his armor and shoulders. His helm held two hornlike structures that the humans thought made it look like a Japanese samurai helm. Two piercing cyan-blue eyes looked upon Yurgo. He stood taller than most of the Sangheili in the room, a nine-foot giant.

"Telek 'Heros," said Yurgo, his eyes opening wide.

"Telek?" Shri said in a gasp. "What the hell are you..."

"You were taking too damn long," said Telek. "I figured I'd hurry things up a bit."

"Oh, thanks!" Shri said, her voice more spiteful than grateful.

He lifted up what appeared to be an ordinary human automatic, magnum, except it looked rather oversized to be one. He felt a bolt of cyan graze upon his shield, it fluctuating in blue as it was hit. He pointed the magnum at the Sangheili who fired upon him. Lightning flashed and raced out from the end of the gun, forking upon impact of the Sangheili, spreading out to the other guards. They jostled violently, toppling over. Yurgo could only smell ozone in the air and fried tar from their bodies. Telek smirked.

"Your turn," he said, pointing the gun at the Shipmaster.

Yurgo dropped his sword, holding his hands up in the air. Telek tilted his head, his smile growing.

"That's more like it."

He walked up the platform and took hold of Yurgo, turning him around. Telek grabbed each one of his wrists and bound them in a plastic, black zip tie he pulled from his leather utility and ammo belt. Telek tilted his head, looking over at Ysoa holding Yvette.

"We'll get her back to the ship, don't worry," he said.

"Yes, Excellency," said Ysoa. He looked down at Yvette, her face looked peaceful. He wiped a drop of her blood from her nose. Telek came to the holographic panel before him and swiped his hand across the surface, moving the various screens around in a particular sequence he knew. Blue interfaces crossed the screen with his right hand as he zoomed out from a red screen. Then, a siren sounded as the lights around him turned red. Telek swiped at the screens again and pressed a flickering triangular button, calling up the intercom.

"Listen to me, crew of the Pious Reckoning," he began. "I have control of this ship's weapons and life support systems. I have set this ship to self destruct. I will leave this ship with your Shipmaster and you will die on this ship unless you surrender the ship to me and report to your life pods to be jettisoned. You've got five minutes." He lifted his fingers to his head. "Joli, I want you to back the Shadow up."

"Excellency?" began Joli.

"You heard me," said Telek.

"I'm getting a reading that the ship's self destruct has been activated," said Joli.

"Yeah," said Telek. "It has."

There was a long pause and he thought he heard Joli's breath tremble.

"Releasing gravity lift," said Joli. "Rolu, help me back the
Shadow up."

"Tell me if you see any life pods," said Telek.

"Will do," said Joli.

Telek swept his hands across the holographic panels and a massive forward screen appeared before him. Right above he could see the dark shape of his super carrier slowly moving away, the gravity lift underneath coming into view as it moved. He looked over at a clock ticking down the minutes.

"What the hell is your plan, Telek?" Shri asked. "We just blow up with the ship?"

"I got nothin'," said Telek, giving a shrug. He took out his steel tin and took a drink of the fresh, cold cider.

"Damn it," she huffed.

"_Excellency, no life pods have even attempted to escape," _said Rolu.

Telek looked back to the screen, noticing that three minutes had already ticked by. Then, he passed his gaze back to Yvette. She moaned slightly, her eyes fluttering open. She lifted her heavy head up, running a hand through her short, ashy brown, curly hair. Her eyes came upon Telek. He was so calm

"Admiral!" she said. "Sirâ€"

"Can you get us off the ship?" Telek asked.

"You can expect her to re-Connect!" said Shri. "She's burned out her time limit."

Telek walked down the ramp and knelt before Yvette. He lifted his magnum to her, opening up the magazine. The big Sangheili pulled out a shell, popping it in. And then, he handed it to her.

"You've got less than a minute, Sergeant Major," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said, clasping her hands around the gun's handle. Yvette rose to her feet, holding the heavy magnum tightly in her hands. She lifted the gun up, her eyes started glowing blue once more, the cords draping down her back, and the black markings appearing upon her cheeks. The tip of the gun began to glow brilliant blue and like a mist, it spread around her form.

"Ysoa," began Telek. "Take care of our prisoner."

"Yes, Excellency," said Ysoa. He rose to his feet and walked up the ramp. He grabbed Yurgo by his armor and dragged him down. The prisoner Shipmaster growled.

"You honestly are going to leave my crew," said Yurgo.

"I gave them a chance to leave," said Telek. "So I could just take the ship. But they didn't. Guess they'll just have to go down with it."

Yvette fired the gun and in a long stream, a swirling portal of glowing liquid opened up in front of them. She stumbled forward and Telek caught her, hefting her up into his arms. Telek took hold of his magnum from her hands and holstered it.

"The rest of my team are back on the _Shadow," _said Shri.

"We got what we came for," said Telek. "They can die for their beliefs. It's what they did before when they were Covenant. Everyone, in the portal."

He looked back at the clock, seeing now only 30 seconds were left. Once more, a smirk crawled up his mandibles just as Shri and Ysoa and their prisoner jumped through with a flash. Telek held to Yvette tightly and leapt through as well.

Outside the ship, the _Shadow of Darkness, Silent Wrath, _and the _Divine Journey _were swiftly pulling away from the _Pious Reckoning_. The ship itself vibrated as cyan cracks formed along its shell. It seemed to have taken a deep breath just right before it was engulfed in purple white light. Shards of ship flew out, impacting upon the shielding of the other three ships. Inside the _Shadow of Darkness, _Telek had thrown his prisoner, Shipmaster Yurgo into the brig. His guards clicked on the force field and Yurgo roared in defiance.

"Damn you!" he called.

"I can't help it if you're that stupid to notice a trap," said Telek. "Besides, I've been searching all over for you."

"Why?" Yurgo asked.

"Yurgo 'Tizswad," began Telek. "The Covenant Remnant are holding out on Laqil. I want to know why. What's so interesting about that glassed planet that a bunch of religious fundamentalists would want to hide out on it?"

"To hide from the traitor Arbiter and his heretics," said Yurgo. "Such as yourself."

"I figured you'd say that," said Telek. "You have all the time in the world to tell me as we return back to Sanghelios."

Yurgo sighed, leaning against the wall.

_"Excellency!" _called the voice of Joli. _"I've got a call from Alan Tyler. He's back on Earth. He wants to talk to you."_

"I'll come down and have our chat later," said Telek. He left the brig, passing up through the enormous corridors towards his bridge. He paused for a moment at the infirmary to find Chief Surgeon Dr. Erin 'Venam busy with his medical drones. He stood beside Yvette laying upon a medic bed. Telek walked inside, placing his hands behind his back.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Stable," said Erin. "A minute more and she would have been brain dead."

"Why does the Array fry their brains if they stay connected to it too long?" Telek asked.

The chief surgeon turned to his superior and shook his head. The soft light of the medical bay played upon his muted golden, zealot armor. Erin shook his head.

"I still don't know half of what this hyper dimensional computer and power source they jack themselves into is capable of doing," he said. "But I suspect that it's like pumping a rubber tire too full of air. It can only take so much before it pops. Same thing for them too. The higher skilled Technomancers can take being connected longer."

"It just worries me that my own men, like Tom, each time they attempt to use this abilityâ€"he comes one step closer to being a vegetable,"

said Telek. "I don't want them to use it too much, not unless it's absolutely necessary." He took in a deep breath. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with an old fashioned gun and a few fists thrown here and there."

"Yes, sir," said Erin.

"Let me know about her status, Doc," said Telek. "As it changes."

"Yes, sir."

Telek finally came to the bridge, descending down the ramp. He climbed into his command chair, turning towards the forward screen.

"Alan Tyler is on the line, Excellency," said Rolu.

"Put him on," said Telek.

"Hello, Telek, glad to hear from you," said a familiar, British-accented voice.

"Alan," said Telek. "Glad to hear you made it back to Earth."

"Not only did I make it back to Earth," began Alan. _"But I became an unwarranted tour guide for a very important dignitary you should know about. Right now, though, I am at the funeral for Alistair."_

"I see," said Telek. "How is Alistair's clan?"

"Good spirits, well, at least they welcomed us in good spirits."

"Right. Give my best to them."

"I will."

Telek scratched the back of his neck and took in a deep breath.

"I had to tell the Council on Sanghelios about Megellan," he began. "I'm afraid they didn't take it well. Many of them didn't."

"I understand," said Alan. _"Speaking of which. Megellan's sovereign ruler is here. His name is Emperor Kedzuel Draconis. He was the one who I took on that tour. Apparently, the Precursors have returned completely and they brought their ships. Currently, they are working with Kiryuu and Malcho in repairing the ships they brought over. It's a bit difficult to explain, but they need the galaxy's assistance if they ever want to be at full force again in order to defeat the Reapers."_

There was a long pause as Telek gripped the arms of his chair. He took in a deep breath, his eyes flashing with fury.

"You mean to tell me those guys are here?" he asked. "How long have they been here?"

"Two years."

"I wish Kiryuu had told me about his Precursor friends being on Earth," Telek barked. "It would have saved me a lot of trouble."

_"Kiryuu didn't even know until a few days ago," _said Alan.

"Even then, just a couple of days of them coming here and actually telling those idiots the real truth," said Telek. "Because lord knows they didn't believe meâ€_again_! After all I tried to do for them, they didn't believe me again about the Forerunners."

There was a brief pause on Alan's end: _"What happened?"_

"Civil war," replied the Sangheili Zealot. "This whole Forerunner shit, I never knew how many of my people still bought into the whole thing even after all we've been through during the Covenant War. I tried, Alan. I honestly tried. I thought they listened, many of them didn't. Luckily, there's guys like Otto, Rtas, and a few others in power who still honestly believe what I've been saying was true. Thing is though, when you find out that your gods were lying all this time, it's kinda hard to deal with. Many of them think I was possessed, still believe that shit that the Prophet of Truth told them. Then I went to Otto and told him about Megellan. We had to tell the Council. I think that was the straw that broke the camel's back. Not your fault, not Megellan's fault. No one's fault. This was just building up for the last couple of years after the war ended. Now we've got these Sangheili Storm assholes who broke from the rest of us, using terror to bring many back into the Religion of the Forerunners again."

"The Forerunners are dead, Megellan killed the last one," said Alan.

"Jesus died too, but that didn't stop half your planet from going to Sunday worship," said Telek. "They're calling the Didact a martyr. His death strengthened their beliefs. Now, I'm in the middle of a war against my own people all because those idiots who still believe in the Forerunner's divinity are a bunch of morons who won't listen to me!"

"So, what does this mean?"

"It means that I don't think I can rally enough Sangheili ships to fight the Reapers when they finally get here," said Telek, drawing in a heavy breath. "Not with this civil war going on. Maybe you can have this Emperor Kedzuel come over and have a talk with my people. Have him tell them the truth. Let them hear it from him since he's the leader of the Precursors. The Forerunners stole their technology; have him tell the Council that. The Forerunners were never really the true protectors of this galaxy. Have him say that! Other than that, I don't know what all I can do for you. I'm sorry I can't be there for Alistair's funeral. Just a lot going on here. I feel like I'm kicking you in the teeth by not being there."

"No," said Alan. _"It's alright. You have to think about your people and get them ready for the Reapers. This Civil War is gonna put a dampener on things, Telek."_

"It wasn't my idea," said Telek. "I didn't want half my people

fighting the other half over a stupid religion that was, in its creation, a fucking lie. But religion does that, you know?"

"Yeah," said Alan. _"I know."_

"I'll keep you posted as best as I can," he said. "I really do think I need some help here. My own voice doesn't carry the same weight anymore. I thought it did."

"I'll talk to Kedzuel," said Alan. _"He still needs to travel around the galaxy and see where everything is. Since his ship is pretty much built, and if he has the coordinates, he might be able to come, but I can't speak for them. The Precursors are having issues of their own trying to get resources to finish the other ships."_

"If he can solve my problem," said Telek. "I'll give him the resources he needs from Sanghelios. No questions asked. If he has to drill in some farmer's backyard to do it, he's got my permission. That farmer can piss off and go somewhere else."

"I'll let him know that," said Alan. _"Keep in touch, Telek."_

"No problem," said Telek. "Take care. Give my best to Alistair's clan. And tell himâ€"I'm not too sore about what happened that night on Illium. He'sâ€"he's alright with me."

"Thanks," said Alan. _"Thatâ€"means a lot."_

As the comm went dead, Telek took his helmet off, placing his head into his hands.

"Excellency," began Joli. "What would this mean for us?"

Telek took in a deep breath as he leaned back against the padded back of his chair. The gravity chair lowered and he stepped off, walking towards the tactical controls of his ship where Rolu and Joli sat. He leaned over the control panel and turned to both of them.

"It means we might be able to get the proof we need in order to make those Covenant Remnant bastards realize what they're doing is only gonna mean more trouble for our people as a whole," he replied. He leaned up. "Ever since we battled the last of the Covenant Loyalists, we protected our home, but I should have realized the trouble we were in when we were left with nothing to believe in. I had my own stubborn attitude to believe in, I knew wholeheartedly that the lies we were fed only would make us weak. Otto and I only found out in our archives, the data of the First Arbiter, even he questioned the religion brought by the San'Shyumm. Now we have these Precursors, beings who were there when it happened, when the Forerunners deceived the galaxy. They are the proof."

"Even when the proof is staring at them in their faces, Excellency," began Rolu. "They are more willing to believe a lie, because the lie gives them something more than what they see."

Telek sighed, wagging his head heavily. He paced his helm back upon his head, crossing his arms.

"I don't know what to believe in anymore," he said. "If there really

is a divine presenceâ€"a god out there watching over usâ€"or are we just foolin' ourselves. Even the humans still believe in some sort of god, whether it be the one who died on two wooden planks, the one who looks like a bush on fire, or the moon, the sun, the planets, the treesâ€"did you know humans worshiped trees as gods?"

Joli leaned back upon his chair: "I did not know that, Excellency. Itâ€"seems silly that they did."

"Is it anymore silly than us worshiping a bunch of old artifacts left by a species who committed seppuku because of some parasite?" asked Telek. "I'm so ready to just cast off any god, whether it be something that was, something that is, or something that is more like a feeling in the heartâ€"I just don't want that anymore, that attachment to owe something I don't even understand nor can touchâ€"my loyalty and receive nothing in return." He shook his head again. "I don't want to be fooled by a lie either. Much rather just accept the fact that god, whatever it is, doesn't exist. Let me be ignorant of him/her/it/whatever. I'm happier that way."

"I still believe in our godsâ€"" said Joli, placing to fingers together, looking rather somber. "What they stood for at least."

Telek's eyebrow cocked up: "I hope you don't plan on going to those Covenant Remnant bastards!"

"No, Excellency," said Joli. "Never. I believe in what they used to stand for. Peace, stability. Prosperity. The Covenant Remnant doesn't want that. They want to go back to the old ways, theâ€"uncivilized ways. Cast off what we've achieved through the centuries. It's like taking a step back. Maybe the Great Journeyâ€"becoming like our godsâ€"isn't really meant to say we fire off the Halos and die. Maybe it's to grow like they did, become the protectors of the galaxy like they did. And I know even the humans believe this. Men like 'Mdama don't believe in such things. They see humans as a plague. But we shouldn't fight each other, we should have peace and work together, that's what our gods wanted. Gods like the Librarian wanted that, right?"

Telek dipped his head in thought and only smiled slightly.

"Maybe," said Telek. "But, you can ask the Precursors when we finally meet all of them." He settled back into his seat once more. "I do know this, though. Creatures like King Ghidorah, he is not unlike a god, right? Look at what he can do. Isn't that what we would think a god would do? The power a god would wield? Yet, we do not worship himâ€"we fear him. If he is really a god of some sort, he'll get no worshiping from me either. But he won't get my fear too. And the Precursors, they being as powerful as the Forerunners had even said they were, they too have powers of our gods, and more."

"Do we worship them?" asked Rolu.

"I don't think this Emperor Kedzuel is the type who likes that sort of thing," said Telek. "Or else, he'd probably had that pipsqueak Alan grovelin' at his feet already, right?"

Joli chuckled: "Alan isn't the type to worship or grovel to anyone."

"No, he ain't," said Telek. He glanced away and whispered silently. "At least that's one thing I like about the kid." He turned back to his helmsman and snapped his fingers. "To Sanghelios. We've got to report back to Rtas and Otto what we discovered."

2. II

****1009, September 10, 2560 (Military Time)\Earth****

It had been a few weeks, if not even later since he visited the Citadel to meet with the Council. Kedzuel wanted to visit it one more time, for one specific purpose. He knew it was a liability. Dr. Liara T'Soni wanted to speak to him about the Citadel. Only a few moments ago, she had that chance. The massive Kethosian ship, _Shi'lithra _orbited around Earth as Kedzuel monitored the last of the repairs. Though he had revealed the ship and allowed it to travel to the Citadel as it was, still some minor repairs needed to be maintenance. There were some issues with the shield emitters, and Kedzuel was worried whether or not the device was operational. However, he had nothing to test it out with. Despite all of this, the ship was working properly.

Kedzuel crossed his arms, smiling at the image of his younger sister, Nercine, who only smiled back. He had to contact her, see how she was handling his job. Though Kedzuel was the Emperor, because he was not on Kethoi, he had to temporarily turn the position over to the current next in line, his sister Nercine. For the time being, she was the Emperor while he was away to Earth and the other worlds of the Milky Way Galaxy.

"I hope Serina is behaving herself," said Kedzuel.

Nercine laughed: "Oh, she is. For now at least. Which worries me even more."

"Why's that?"

"I feel like she is scheming something when she's not being herâ€"boisterous self," said Nercine.

"She has quite a bite, sis," said Kedzuel. Then, he leaned closer to the holographic screen. "But I know you can bite back, and harder."

"I take pride in that. How are things on Earth? How is Malcho?"

"He's doing well," said Kedzuel. "Right now, I have a guest on board my ship. An alien known as an Asari. She is a doctor in archeology and anthropology and more than eager to learn about our ways. One of her specialties was studying the Protheans and also figuring out a connection between them and the Forerunners."

Nercine shook her head, her dark brown hair swaying about her shoulders.

"There isn't any," she said.

"You know that, I know that," began Kedzuel. "But she does not. Actually, they found out about it rather too late, I'm afraid. However, she and many others discovered a unique find, Forerunners who were sympathetic in humanity."

"Never thought I'd meet one," said Nercine.

"Unfortunately, you never will," said Kedzuel, in a more stern and deeper tone. "Kiryuu Knight has provided me with some interesting information, mostly from hisâ€"ahâ€"protÃ©gÃ©, Vice-Admiral Telek 'Heros. Telek, during the time when he was with this faction of aliens known as the Covenant, ran across many Forerunner facilities, some especially ran by one called the Librarian."

"I recall that name," said Nercine, dipping her head in deep thought. Her eyes glowed a more intense blue as she focused upon the name. "One of the leading life-crafters of the Forerunner people. She cataloged millions of species, including our own."

"Those life-crafters were responsible in stealing our technology through the Forerunner mutations, Nercine," said Kedzuel. "However, she knew that Khan was right in choosing. The People of Erde-Tyrene proved themselves over and over their willingness to fright the Hydra, and after what one of the Forerunner life-crafters did to create the Flood, were willing to set aside everything in correcting that mistake." His eyes narrowed. "There was no question about it, they acted as we would have acted."

"My dear brother," began Nercine, cocking an eyebrow. "It seems you wish to defend our uncle's choice."

Kedzuel nodded: "I think that choice he made was the only sensible choice he had. To intrust such a great duty to a species even we considered beneath ourselves, he must have seen greatness in them. After speaking to some of them, I now see that greatness he saw. Khan had made some stupid mistakes in his days, but this wasn't one of them." He flipped a lock behind his shoulder. "However, I am not going to follow his example. Humanity alone is not the only one now burdened with the protection of this galaxy. They all are."

"It was always all or nothing with you, Kedzuel," said Nercine. "We all give one hundred percent, or we do not."

Kedzuel chuckled and nodded, crossing his arms.

"Can you blame me?" he asked. "I see the talents of others shining just as bright as we Blitzardi. What makes us the only ones capable of being at the top when we can share it? Everyone must put forth their best if any of us want to see a happy ending."

"I hope we can deliver one, especially with all the hype I've heard we're getting," said Nercine. "You've made us all out to be miracle workers. But in all seriousnessâ€"don't let your ego get the best of you." She raised a talon, pointing it at him. "It got you in trouble once."

Kedzuel straightened his back and bowed his head: "Keep reminding me that. I think all the brains from father went to you." He grinned. "But I got his good looks."

"Keep telling yourself that," said Nercine with a laugh.

Kedzuel cleared his throat and his face grew stern: "Alan told me the issue about the Sangheili and their civil war. If I ever wish to prepare this galaxy for what's about to come, what can I do about this war?"

"The Council has suggested not to involve yourself in their war, Kedzuel," said Nercine. "At least not involve ourselves."

"Not involve the Emperor, you mean," he said. "What about just me?"

"I'm not in control of you," said Nercine. "If you want to go out and get yourself blasted by aliens, that's your problem."

Kedzuel took in a deep breath, wagging his head.

"Look it is clear that as a government body, in which you represent as Emperor, is..." she began. "We cannot involve ourselves in civil conflicts, not without good reason." She leaned closer to the screen. "But it doesn't mean you can't find one."

Kedzuel grinned: "That's all I needed to know."

"I will keep in touch," said Nercine. "Good luck, big brother."

With that, the screen faded to black, vanishing. Kedzuel took in a deep breath and pressed a dark indentation in the stony gray wall. A door pulled up from the floor, slowly creaking open to a vast, lush field of trees and flowers. He began his walk down a wooden corridor covered in kudzu vines and lilac flowers. He could smell their sweet, grape scent as he walked on. His path was lit softly by golden orbs above casting leafy shadows along the golden, wooden floor. One wall was covered in nothing more than dense, twisted branches, tipped in emerald leaves, and crimson vines with fiery orange leaves. The Blitzardi were fans of nature, as controlling nature itself to create their vast, luxurious palaces was a testament to what they considered their divine power. Kedzuel straightened out his emerald green, silky coat and the decorative collar of golden leaves. A Blitzardi guard passed him followed by a crystalline sentry of blue tourmaline. He paused for a moment and bowed respectfully. Then, he moved on without a return bow from Kedzuel. As he turned a corner, walking towards the guest quarters where Dr. Liara T'Soni was staying in, he noticed someone coming out of her door. It was a Khazabi with long black hair. She was dressed formally in the similar formal robes that Blitzardi nobles would wear. Her wings were hidden under her cloak. Kedzuel grunted and shook his head at the red-scaled Kethos and then strode hard on up to her. The Khazabi's glowing blue eyes lit up when she noticed him wedging her between the door.

"Hello, Jackie," Kedzuel.

"Your Imperial Majesty," she began. "I wasâ€"just checking on our guest."

"I bet you were," said Kedzuel. "Spying on her for Serina like you spy on me?"

Jackie Jurith sighed heavily and leaned her slender frame against the

wooden wall.

"I think the best interest for the Council and its Chancellor needs to be taken into an account, Emperor Kedzuel," she began. "Including respected guests." Jackie looked back through the crack of the door. "However, Dr. T'Soni wanted to learn about our customs. I suggested that if she wanted to learn so much about Kethosian customs, perhaps dressing like one of us would give her some idea." She pushed open the door and Kedzuel peeked in. "I only gave her a modified suitâ€"the latest fashion on Kethoi. Serina Khyel thought that she might like it."

"And no doubt some sort of little camera installed in the collar, or microphone, or whatever little spying devices she likes to put in to keep an eye on me," Kedzuel huffed as he watched Liara examine herself in the mirror. "Tracking deviceâ€"you both are little nosy snoots I really don't need to deal with."

"The dress was scanned, Kedzuel," said Jackie. "No devices installed."

"So you say. Go about yourâ€"business Mss. Jurith."

Jackie bowed pertly: "My Emperor."

With that, she turned on one heel and swiftly walked down the corridor. Kedzuel growled, curling his lip into a snarl and walked right in. Liara was dressed in a rather slender robe that folded much like the heavy kimonos that Kedzuel wore, except it was lighter in fabric. She wore an under robe and he could see the lining of the white color above the crimson red. On top of that was a draping, cool, asymmetrical jacket. The sleeves of the jacket only came up to her forearms. She wore a pleated skirt hanging to her ankles. She wore simple black, suede shoes. Liara turned and gasped seeing Kedzuel come walking up.

"Your Majesty!" she said. "Iâ€"uhâ€"Miss Jurith gave me thisâ€"rather nice outfit."

"You look nice in it," he said. "That's a more modern style than what I normally wear. Nobility usually wears the cumbersome, heavy, traditional garbs." Kedzuel banged on the hard vest he wore over his heavy coat. "Like what I'm wearing now." He cleared his throat. "If you don't mind, I'd like to have a look at that dress you're wearing."

"Uh, what?"

Before she could get an answer out of him, Liara saw several cilia of his glowing cords rise up from the floor. Liara slowly began to back away.

"Just hold still," he said.

The tips softly traced along her curving lines, touching the fabric lightly.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking for bugs."

"Bugs?"

Kedzuel took in a deep breath: "Liara, don't trust everyone you meet on this ship. We're not the haloed angels coming to rescue you from the devil like you think we are. Not everyone here has good intentions."

"But Miss Jurithâ€"

"Jackie is a political spy," said Kedzuel. His cords withdrew and fell slowly back to the floor.

"A spy?" Liara asked.

"She is Serina's Inlet-Outlet," Kedzuel began. He walked to a chair and sat down. "An Inlet-Outlet is an information vampireâ€"as I like to call them. Jackie's job is to spy on me and report anything that might incriminate me back to Serina Khyel."

"Why?"

"It is a long story, Liara," said Kedzuel. "One that has to do with the near genocide of the Khazabi by my uncle's hands. His actions created many Khazabi extremists who not only hated him, but all Blitzardi. Serina is one of them. Serina, when I lopped my uncle's head off, wanted to take the throne herself. I warned her if she did so, she would make life for the Khazabi even worse. The Blitzardi did not want to bow to a Khazabi emperor. I said if I was made Emperor, I would make sure that the Khazabi are treated with the proper respect they deserve and that they would have positions on my council. To even make her happy over this, I appointed her as High Chancellor, meaning she has control over the civil-political institutions of the Kethosi government. However, I still had control and power over the military branches." He sighed. "That's what Serina didn't like."

"So, she's trying to find ways of kicking you off the throne," said Liara.

"She can't remove me from the throne politically," said Kedzuel. "But I have many enemies. Oh what information they could get a hold of if I even stumbled and fell flat on my face for a day."

Liara took hold of herself and shivered.

"Did you find anything?"

"No, thank goodness," replied the Blitzardi. "I'm still not satisfied though. But you do look nice in it."

"Thank you," said Liara.

Liara reached up to scratch something that irritated her neck. Kedzuel leaned in with a coppery golden claw to touch her neck. He spied a small red bump against the teal blue skin and he rubbed it.

"Damn it," he said.

"What's wrong?" asked Liara.

Kedzuel wagged his head and huffed. Reached up to the air and then his claw glowed a cyan blue. The glow extended outward, forming a square shaped cyan holographic projected screen. The Blitzardi pulled the screen down, placing it in between him and Liara. He saw an image of her form, X-rayed by the screen. He could see every detail of her, her bone structure with a ghostly outline of her form.

"What happened?" Liara asked.

"Jackie may have placed a probe inside of you," he replied.

"A probe?"

"Yeah, just stay very still, Doctor T'Soni. I have to see where that probe is. Maybe we can remove it."

"Would she create a probe that isn't traceable?" Liara asked, holding as still as she could, her hands at her side. She looked up at Kedzuel, her blue eyes blinking.

"It's possible," said Kedzuel. "Only, I know what I'm looking for. She's planted probes on me before and we were able to find them"after weeks of search. But after we found them, I made sure I programmed my particular Connection Cords to recognize any of those probes." He straightened up, allowing the cilia of his cords to once more graze over her body. "This might tickle a bit." Kedzuel smiled. "Don't laugh too hard, okay?"

The cords slide up and down her form, touching very softly to her skin. Liara felt them against her skin, tickling her like tiny down feathers.

"Hope you don't think I'm some sort of pervert just doing this to take advantage of you," said Kedzuel.

"Well...um..."

"What we consider our version of Human Resources is down the hall and to the right," said Kedzuel with a slight chuckle. "If you wish to file a complaint." He paused, seeing the insides of her body as his cords passed along her skin, gently inserting themselves to gather the data. The screens flashed with several red dots and Kedzuel's cyan-blue eyes narrowed. Concern drawing taunt upon his muzzle. "I don't see the probe. But"what in the name of my Aunt Justi is this?"

"What?" asked Liara. "What's wrong?"

"These dots," he said. He saw the many augmentation implants that lined Liara's spine, her hands, her arms, her legs, her waist. Each one flashed with red. "These dots mean"Far Realm contamination. What the hell are these implants in you?"

"They are my biotic implants," replied Liara. "It's what a biotic uses to enhance our psychokenetic abilities."

Kedzuel pulled his cords from her and the screen vanished: "You use Strange Energy to heighten psionic powers?"

"Well, we Asariâ€"our biology has come to rely upon Element Zero," Liara began, placing her hands together. "We were always very psionically giftedâ€"it's just that when the Forerunnersâ€"

"Those guys," said Kedzuel, his eyes widening in horror. "They altered your genetics to be more in tune to Strange Energy. That stuff isâ€" He backed away, wagging his head in disbelief, trying to calm himself down. "Liara, the energy you call Element Zero is highly dangerous stuff."

"I know," said Liara, her face flushing a purple color, her hands clenching into fists. "Of course I know! But I just can't get rid of my biotics. They're not exactly removable. And I don't care how highly advanced you Precursors are, I doubt you have enough information on my species to safely remove them. The Asariâ€"whether we chose to or not, are dependent upon it." She crossed her arms, looking away from the Precursor Emperor. "It's not our fault that we were made the way we are. We had no idea what Element Zero really was. And besides, your peopleâ€"the ones who were _supposed_ to prevent those Extinction Cycles from happening decided to leave, and not tell us. Don't blame my species for being ignorant."

Kedzuel sighed slowly: "I'm not blaming your species. Or you. My attitude comes from my utter shock of it. My people have been so adamant about preventing King Ghidrah's energy from being used forâ€"wellâ€"that because what it could ultimately do to a species when it does. And to see thisâ€"it reminds me what a mistake it was to leave without even a simple message to species like yours of this danger. But even if we did leave a message, how could we ultimately know that it got through with the Usurpers trying to purge the galaxy of the evidence of our existence."

Liara relaxed, walking back towards her bed. She exhaled heavily, plopping upon the bed. Kedzuel followed, his tail lightly tapping against the strange wooden surface of Liara's lavish quarters. A cylinder of wood rose up from the floor as if it knew that he wanted to sit down in front of her and Kedzuel took his seat. He leaned over, folding his coppery-golden claws together in his lap.

"I'm not angry," he said. "I'm concerned. Alright? My species has seen many others fall when they attempted to alter their genetics to beâ€"powered up by Strange Energy. I've seen what it does to them. I've seen what Strange Energy does to people who have been around it for a very long timeâ€"it does some of the strangest thingsâ€"

"Is that why they call it Strange Energy?" Liara asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Now my concern is how much does Jackie know and will she share this with her boss?"

"Serina?" asked Liara. She looked up at him.

"That scratch on your neck may have come from Jackie's attempt to take a sample of your DNA," said Kedzuel. "You're right, we don't know much about your anatomy, we don't even have your genetics on file for access."

"But the Array," began Liara.

"Can't rely on it for everything."

"So, if she studies my genetics and finds what the Forerunners did to my people"

Kedzuel reached up and scratched his neck: "Yeah, allowing my forces to remain here may be very difficult. I had to convince the Council to allow me to bring this much back to your galaxy. I intend to return to Kethoi and fully force the Council to relieve power back to me once more due to the Kethosi are going to war thing. That's the only time the Emperor has full control over everything. Serina doesn't want that to happen. If they find out that one of the species that we are defending happens to be potentially Far Realm touched the Council will rally behind Serina even more and calling my decisions to return here foolish."

Liara groaned, her head falling into her hands.

"And that's my other concern," said Kedzuel. "We honestly didn't know. Now I know. And I am not going to share this with anyone else. I expect you won't either. I don't want more of my people to find out. Trust me, Zhane is a bit head-lobbing-happy if he suspects you're a danger to me. So, no telling him."

"A danger to you?" Liara asked. She started laughing at the utter ridiculousness of that statement. Then, she was silenced when she saw the stone expression of Kedzuel. "You're serious. What danger am I to you? You're big enough to squash me flat in reality. And your abilities what you did to the Shadow Broker for one. I wonder if my biotics can even keep up."

"It's not what you can do now," said Kedzuel. "It's what you could do once King Ghidorah controls you. Much like the Connection that allows us to draw upon a 'cosmic' power and provides us with unlimited energy to fuel some fantastic feats King Ghidorah can do the same to any of his Acolytes. A person connected and controlled by King Ghidorah is an antithesis in abilities to the Array. And that person can mimic much of we can do. And given that you are already psionically gifted, well"

"I see," said Liara. "Okay. I understand."

"It makes me wonder if there has been any genetic deformities in your species due to your constant exposure to Strange Energy."

"Well, not much as you may think but there is one," said Liara. "It's what happens when one Asari and another Asari have children."

Kedzuel tilted his head, leaning it upon a fist.

"We Asari pride ourselves in mating with other species," she said. "We take the best traits from our partners and add it to our children. It's looked down upon for two Asari to have children. And when one does the child is called a Pureblood, which is an insult among my people. I'm my mother she and another Asari I'm a Pureblood."

The Blitzardi nodded silently.

"Well, there is this neurological disease that can happen with

Purebloods," said Liara. "It causes an Asari to become sterileâ€"for one, and for anotherâ€"affects their telepathy. It is called Ardat-Yakshi, it means Demon of the Night Winds in the old dialect. When diagnose with this disease, the Asari is given two choices, exile or execution."

"Why so extreme?" asked Kedzuel.

"It has to do with what the condition does to the nervous system of the Ardat-Yakshi. Each time the Asari Embraces with another, she absorbs the victim's memories, their knowledge. During the Embrace, the victim is violently harmedâ€"the brain hemorrhages. Sometimes, if the condition is exceptionally severe, the victim of an Ardat-Yakshi can in fact die from the experience. The Asari is motivated by a compulsion to mate because the Embrace that she experiences is addicting. So, in order to keep others safeâ€"because we know the afflicted cannot help themselves, it is best they either die or be exiled. There are monasteries for some Ardat-Yakshi and they go to live in quiet solitude with others of their kind. They are least compelled toâ€"attack others when they are around their own."

"So, are youâ€" "

"No," said Liara. "Thank the Goddess I was lucky not to have it despite my parentage. I knew because when I was asked to help Commander Shepard deal with the visions she had through the Beacons left by the Forerunners, my mental link did not harm her in any way. Besides, upon maturity, Ardat-Yakshi are rather identifiable by their compulsive behavior. I do not have such behavior. Still, being called Purebloodâ€"it does hurt. I can't help who my parents are."

Kedzuel took in a deep breath and nodded: "You're not alone. Though my father was no evil tyrantâ€"my uncle. And I can't help the fact that I look very much like him either. You can't choose your bloodlines."

"I know," said Liara. "My motherâ€"Matriarch Benezia, she helped Saren bring Sovereign to the Citadel. There are so many questions as to whyâ€"but when I realized how powerful King Ghidrah isâ€"that he could break even one of the most powerful biotics I've ever knownâ€" "

"Makes me wonder if what you have inside of you made it rather easy for him to break her," said Kedzuel. "The materials were already there. As for this Ardat-Yakshi, absorbing the minds of others and killing their victimsâ€"that does sound like what King Ghidrah can do. He feeds off of knowledge. It is one of the reasons why he is here. This place is full of knowledge." He placed a gentle paw upon her shoulder. "I won't say anything to anyone about this. Not unless I know who all I can trust."

"That's soâ€"odd..." said Liara. "You're the Emperor and you can't trust anyone with anythingâ€"you have to keep secrets even from those who are beneath you."

Kedzuel sighed: "It's because having power means I have to have the means to keep it. Being on the top grants me more enemies than I do have friends. Or can make friends into enemies, or false friends out of enemies. This position has given me a constant problem with paranoia. In some way, I can kind of see why my uncle got a little

crazy at the endâ€“why he became so susceptible to King Ghidorah's charms." He looked to her eyes. "No one is safe."

He looked up when he heard the sound of a chime softly ringing from the ceiling. A voice boomed from the trees.

"Your Imperial Majesty. The _Serenity_ has arrived. They are ready to send over Commissioner Megellan."

"Thank you," said Kedzuel. "I'll be down in a moment." He looked back to Liara. "Well, I better go take that. Care to come with?"

"Sure," said Liara as she rose when he rose. She took his paw and they vanished in a spark of golden light.

3. III

1119, September 10, 2560 (Military Time)**_Serenity_**

Megellan gathered his things from the room that he for a short time called his home. The _Serenity_ had needed an engineer in which he filled and glad to do it. However, his people needed him, Kedzuel needed him. Alan Tyler had found himself an engineer, calling upon a familiar face who knew _Serenity_, knew how she ran, was a part of herâ€“from the inside out. Megellan, though was thrilled to be the engineer of a ship that he called a "Pioneer Vessel", a ship though primitive to what he was used to working with, but still a stepping stone of space exploration. He was happy to be able to work on her, to have an appreciation of what it was like to travel the stars more simply, and to understand just how big the universe was by traveling it so slowly.

Kethosians took too much advantage of their technology and began to become unappreciative of it. After spending such a short time upon the _Serenity_, Megellan had gained a new insight upon his own technology. He put on the armor that Alan had found him wearing when he was sustained in that suspended animation for over 50 thousand years as a prisoner to the now long gone Forerunners, beings who stole the Kethosiansâ€“the Precursors' technology to create their galactic empireâ€“which was doomed by their own arrogance. They believed they were the ones to destroy the being known as King Ghidorah, and they were wrong.

Megellan tucked his change of clothes into the pouches lining his belt. He took hold of his helm and tucked it under his arm.

The green scaled, Lengodo Kethos' twitched a pointed ear and turned when he heard the sound of knocking at his door. Megellan smiled when he saw Alan walking through, the grin spreading across his scaly muzzle.

"How's it going?" Alan asked.

"Good," said Megellan. "I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to work on your ship. I had a great learning experience."

"Thank you for the help," said Alan.

They walked out towards the docking bay, and Alan looked upon Megellan, seeing the blue glowing cords dangling from the back of his neck. This was the first time he had a Technomancer working upon the ship, and it was the last. Through the power of the Array, Megellan was able to keep up repairing the Serenity with ability to repair he with little training. However, Megellan made the promise to Alan that he would do nothing to update herâ€”or improve her since there was a common belief that altering her changes her personality. Even Megellan agreed that she needed to be preserved despite her flaws. Megellan only used his knowledge to keep her running. The Precursor scientist smiled as he looked upon the rustic bulkhead, the walls lined with rivets and piping, something that was missing on Kedzuel's ship.

Megellan knew he had to help his old friend on making the final repairs to the grand Battle Chariot as well as oversee the repairs to the other Shi-Class chariots. Kedzuel could not do this on his own, he needed someone smarter than he to make sure every bit was set properly in place. That is where Megellan shined the most. Alan wondered if the Precursor technology had changed over the course of 50 thousand years since Megellan had been there, but from what Megellan had told him, that was not the case. Due to Khan's own machinations, he had caused a technological regress of the Precursor society due to their utter dependency of Technomancy. Putting together ships like the Shi'Lithra needed scientists who remembered how to work on such technological advanced and picky ships. Megellan knew how to properly reconstruct those ships that were capable of creating a stable riff that only pulled in Strange Matter, the matter that made up creatures who came from the inconceivable odd separate universe that was the Far Realmâ€”the place where King Ghidorah came from. The riff would appear and then disappear upon the command of each ships' pilot. Kedzuel was the pilot for the flagship of the massive fleet brought over from two million light years away in Andromeda.

However, there was something that seemed puzzling to Alan, something that Megellan kept saying over and over when he spoke of the Array. He called it a she and spoke of it as if it was a person and not a super, intergalactic computer that he and many others were able to connect to. The moment he wondered truly about it was when his First Mate Alistair died, or rather why he had to die, or rather why Megellan refused to even save him. That was still something that never sat well with him.

Why wouldn't Megellan save him when it was obvious that he had that ability? And why did the Array not allow him to do it?

The Array appeared a bit more than what it seemed to be and what Technomancy wasâ€”was more than it seemed to be.

Alan continued to stare upon the cords, tilting his head and his golden eyes narrowing. He touched the Precursor's shoulder and took in a deep breath, trying to properly word his question as best as he could.

"I suppose this is it," said Megellan, his voice breaking Alan's thoughts.

"Yeah," said the mutant. "I suppose."

Megellan held out his claw: "I can't tell you how much I appreciate for you rescuing me."

"Maybe you can repay that," said Alan.

"Repay?" asked Megellan. "What do you need?"

"I need an answer," said Alan. "I don't think Kiryuu or Malcho has this answer, despite them being Technomancers. But I think you do. What is the Array? What is it really? What is Technomancy?"

Megellan chuckled and gave a scratch to his head.

"I can't even begin to explain it," he said. "Not even in a relative term."

"Can you try?" asked Alan. "I would like to know. I meanâ€"why didn't the Array let you save Alistair?"

"I already told you," said Megellan. "It goes against Free Will."

"What do you mean by that? What are these laws you talk about. Who is thisâ€"SHEâ€"you talk about? That's what I want to know. Is she the Array?"

Megellan sighed and then walked towards a wall, leaning upon the side. He wagged his head again.

"To even begin to tell you about what the Array is, what those laws are," he began. "I have to tell you about the beginning of the universeâ€"more rather the Multiverse. This universe is one of many that exist, nine to be exact, but before there were more. Unfortunately, the very thing that brought King Ghidorah hereâ€"also destroyed those many different other universes, which is why we are left with nine."

"What brought him here?" Alan asked.

"A weakened barrier between our Multiverse and the Far Realm," said Megellan. "And an accident. It happened 250 million years ago. Existence is much bigger than you know it."

"Alright," said Alan. He settled down upon a chair and leaned upon the back. "Go ahead. Tell me about it."

"I suppose I can give you a crash course in the Cosmology of the Multiverse," said Megellan. "Well, first off, you need to know that this universe is one of nine. Long ago, there were many universes, with infinite possibilities, but within a finite space. All of the various universes is connected through a conduit system known as the Plane of Shadow, and it is also intersected by the Astral Plane."

"I've heard the Astral Plane brought a few times," said Alan. "That is where Dunkelzahn had to go in order to bar King Ghidorah from returning to Earth. I suppose it was one of the reasons why he is trying to use the Reapers now."

"King Ghidorah has many methods," said Megellan. "Your Dunkelzahn

friend was only hampering one. The Reapers are another. But yes, in a way. The Astral Plane serves as our bubble that surrounds the Multiverse, it is our shield that keeps out the Far Realm. The Far Realm is often referred to as the Outside, and this no mistake, it is the outside—outside of that bubble that protects us. There was a great war that happened 250 million years ago, a war that was raged by hyper-dimensional beings—beings you refer to as gods. But they are not gods, not really. However, many of them have the power to create life and direct its evolution, far more advanced than we can. You might say—they are the next step of life—if life dares to take that leap. There is a ruling being above all of them, that which many call You Know Who—many refer to her as that. Though she does have a name—many names." Megellan cleared his throat. "One name we know her as Takhisis. She is the balance between creation and destruction, life and death. Without her, it all would just spiral out of control."

"So, this—Takhisis is God?" Alan asked. "She told you not to bring back Alistair?"

"Alistair told her, remember?" Megellan said. "She does not dictate our actions, we do—and we tell her what we do. That is Free Will. That is the First Law. The First Law means Free Will cannot be hampered. You see, it was before, before this Multiverse existed, there was another, one that relied too much on those beings. So, life was stagnant. It didn't grow, and it withered and died. Free Will is a double edged sword, though. We make our own decisions, but it also leads us to ruin as well as triumph. But through all of this, it makes us stronger—strong enough to face the Outside. That is why she told me not to—because Alistair told her. Takhisis understands that without death, there is no consequence. Even she can die—and she will, eventually. But when she does, so does the Multiverse. We are of her, and she is of us. We are pieces of her. But we have choices while we live. All sentient life does. And these choices can either help or hinder our lives. But we are free to do so without the interference of Takhisis. She wanted this Multiverse to sustain itself, be an entity of itself and she only exists to provide the energy to fuel it or act when something great threatens it. That is all she does and nothing else. She does not want to change our lives because that contaminates the Multiverse, but we are a piece of her and she learns from us when we come back to her. Much like Call is a piece of Kiryuu Knight. Eventually, we have to return to her."

"Return to the Source," said Alan.

Megellan nodded, grinning, seeing the light just twinkle inside the Changeling's eyes as he slowly began to understand the Precursor's words.

"The Second Law is Matter cannot be made from Nothing," said Megellan. "We are all remnants of something else. Including Takhisis. She is a remnant of something far more ancient than you or I. We are all remnants of star dust, supernovas that exploded eons ago." He poked Alan with an armored talon. "This matter that you make up came from somewhere else. And our Multiverse was a remnant of the previous universe that came before it, and when this Multiverse finally dies, a new universe will be born from its remains. And the cycles continues. When life dies, and the energy she granted it to sustain it returns to her, so do our memories, our experiences, our

choicesâ€"good and bad. She lives through us. She experiences what we experience. When we return to her, we tell her our greatest stories, and our greatest failings. And she takes the good and the bad."

"Is there judgement, a hell, a heaven when she listens?" Alan asked.

"There isâ€"but not exactly what you think of it as," said Megellan. "These places we do not go to. It is not for us to go when we die to have a reward or a punishment. These places are where the lesser powered hyper-dimensional beings live, or are imprisoned. And these places exist within the Astral Plane. Many hyper-dimensional beings are imprisoned in what you call a hell, while many others are granted a place to live in quiet solitude in what you might refer to as a heaven. But where we go is only back to her. Which is why King Ghidorah is a problem here. He disrupts thatâ€"he doesn't allow the dead to return to her and hampers her growth as well. He is stealing her power when he absorbs us and takes our knowledge. Every piece that he takes to make into Reapers of Flood forms or anything elseâ€"everything he attempts to Indoctrinate is lost to her."

"So, what you are telling me is that King Ghidorah's true reason of being hereâ€"it wasn't ever about Kiryuu or me, or anyone else, it was about this Takthisis?" asked Alan. "Thisâ€"godly being that created us? So, she's the Array that you use to command Technomancy?" He scratched his head, shaking his brown hair. "So you wield the power of a god? An all powerful god? Why not just snap your fingers and just end it all? Bring this Takthisis down here, have her fix everything?"

"It's not that easy," said Megellan. "We don't learn anything if it were that easy. Life has to be hard. Life has to be full of lessons. And the other reason is, no one Technomancer can ever download all her power into their being. It's like overloading a circuit, eventually, you burn out the wires. It can only take so much energy coming from the source of power. If I were to just open myself up to all her power at onceâ€"I would fry instantly. So, we can only download so much. Better trained and higher performance users of the Array can download more power, but there is a limit. You reach that limit, you can suffer brain hemorrhages, coma, tumors, and of course eventually death. But to spread the power out between many people allows her energy to be wielded more efficiently. She doesn't want us to overload ourselves."

"Does she know what will happen?"

"She is not omniscient," said Megellan. "She never claimed to be. She cannot see the future. Besides, she has seen what a universe is like when it is locked in prescient visions. Free Will is destroyed. You cannot choose for yourself when your fate is already spelled out. It is best she does not have such abilitiesâ€"for all our sakes."

"So, she is the Array?"

"Yes, and no," said Megellan. "She is the Source, the Array is just that, an array of various connector ports that connect to her. The cords from my back represent the Array's many extensions. It acts as a conduit, a terminal that connects us to her, and she is like the Intranet that we surf upon, downloading information, but she is also like a giant power plant. Which is why the Array can be altered and

even corrupted. Files can be corrupted in the terminal. And there are so many billions of them that even she cannot go in and repair all of them. It is up to us to know which ones are corrupted so that we repair them ourselves. We ask too much of her many times, and she already does a lot. But since we are of her and she is of us, when we fix the files, it is like she is doing it as well."

Alan got up, running a hand through his hair. He wagged his head, trying hard to wrap his mind around what he was told. It was not easy, none of this was easy.

"You don't have to believe what I told you, Alan," said Megellan. "You don't. She doesn't expect you to. She doesn't want worshipers. That is why she is not a god. Gods demand worshipers, they demand you to bow before them and believe in them. Through that belief, they gain power. Takhisis is without that need. She just needs you to live and learn."

"I don't know what to believe," said Alan. "It all makes sense and it all doesn't make sense, mate. Butâ€"that's the answer? That's the real truth? No fooling, no tricks, no beating around the bush, that's it? Everything?"

"Yes," said Megellan. "The whole truth. This is the other truth. My species is the only species in the entire Multiverse that does not quite have all our Free Will. Takhisis made us with a purpose, to defend the Multiverse from creatures like King Ghidorah. And as I stated, it is an on going fightâ€"even if we destroy him, there will always be more to take his place. That is why Khan, before his madness, uplifted your species to wield our technology and use Technomancy. He realized we can't be alone in this fight, it's too much of us. Perhaps that is one of her mistakes, she placed too much faith in one species rather than many. Takhisis isn't perfect, Alan. Even she makes mistakes."

Alan took in a deep breath, trying to further digest the rest: "It feels like you've just told me everything I needed to know, Megellan. And yet, there are always more questions."

"Answers always breed more questions," said Megellan with a weak smile. "But I've told you what you wanted to knowâ€"the important bits. And you may believe them if you want to, or completely dismiss them. That is your choice. She does not care. If she did, there would be one religion instead of many."

"I was never really a fan of any fate or godâ€"all powerful being controlling my actions," said Alan.

"And she doesn't want to be," said Megellan.

"I like her already."

"She likes you, too. She likes everybody, no matter what they've done or what life they lead. She can be a bit fickle at timesâ€"and a bit of a bitch, but she has a personality, and chooses, she makes mistakes like we all do, and she learns from them. She's very powerful, but she isn't perfect. I like to think Kedzuel tries to embody herâ€"mentality, show that a powerful being like himself isn't the perfect being in the world."

"Have you or Kedzuel met her?"

"She doesn't speak to manyâ€"not directly," said Megellan. "But yes, I've spoken to her, so has Kedzuel. She doesn't talk much, at least informally. She speaks when we ask the Array questions, when through our own experiences, and no matter how many times we tried to look for an answer ourselves, we cannot see oneâ€"she will speak. She will provide us with a very short, open-ended answer, one we must interpret for our purposes. But she prefers not to speak and just let us use the knowledge she's gathered over the course of 15 billion yearsâ€"that collective knowledge makes up the terminal that the Array is connected to. But she never tells us what we need to look for, that is what we have to do on our own. Her knowledge is like a library, with every book on the floor and uncategorized and no librarian to tell us where to look. On Erde-Tyrene, it is called the Great Library of Alexandria. The Array and the Library are one. But really it is the knowledge that Takhisis has gathered. That knowledge serves one specific purpose, how to make us impervious against the Far Realm. And no matter how much information is stored, not one of those books can tell us that answer. But this Multiverse is more or less a prototype, and with each universe that will succeed it, perhaps she'll be one step closer to that answer."

"Good to know," said Alan.

"250 years ago, Alan," said Megellan. "That is when it happened. That is when that monster came here. We never had a problem with keeping the Far Realm at bay until he came. A war that weakened the shield that protected our Multiverse from the Far Realm, Takhisis was left helpless when she had to let go of billions upon billions of possibilities, realities. It's not an easy thing to watch the very fabric of space and time ripping apart before your eyes. And this rip would have continued, but she managed to save just nine. We're all that is left."

"Not a very comforting thought," said Alan. "I never knew he wasâ€"so powerful as to defeat something like her so easily."

"He only did it because of her weakened state," said Megellan. "She's not dead, just very weak, still trying to hold onto what is left of the dream. She's spread so thin, Alan. Even if she could descend to help us, she'd still be powerless because we are already using that power. We would have to give it all back just to give her the strength to face him."

"What hope do we have if she can't do it?" Alan asked.

"Hope, that is all," said Megellan. "That is all. Even then, whatever happens in the endâ€"not many will be savedâ€"we will lose lives. We can't save everyone, but we can try to save as many as we can."

Alan took in as much as he could, still not quite understanding everything. Still, it was the truth, as best as the truth as he could even understand. He smiled and then held out a gray-scaled, taloned hand to Megellan.

"Thanks, mate," he said. "Thanks forâ€"wellâ€"

Megellan grinned: "My pleasure."

He looked up, as if hearing a voice in his mind that only he could hear. He took in a deep breath and dipped his head.

"See you around the galaxy, Captain," he said.

"Keep Kedzuel out of trouble," said Alan.

"That is a daunting and near impossible task," said Megellan with a laugh. "But I will try."

Then, he vanished in a flash of blue-white light. He reappeared in a field of grass surrounded by forests and a wooden walkway. Megellan smiled as he looked up at the sun. He knew exactly where he was. He heard the sound of feet shuffling, moving closer to him and he turned around. There, walking up with a big smile on his face was Emperor Kedzuel Draconis. He opened his arms up and gave his old friend a great bear hug.

"Good to have you back!" said Kedzuel.

"I knew you'd miss me sooner or later," said Megellan. He stopped when he saw a familiar face walk up from behind Kedzuel. There standing in altered Kethosian clothing was Dr. Liara T'Soni. "Dr. T'Soni, this is a surprise."

"Hello, Commissioner," said Liara.

"Megellan. Kedz, umâ€“why is she..."

"Consider her an ambassador of Thessia," said Kedzuel. "She's here to help reacquaint us to the galaxy and its many changes."

"I see," said Megellan. "And I see you'reâ€“wearing Kethosian clothing. Is that the new style?"

"It is," said Kedzuel. "You've been gone for quite a while, fashions do come and go. Now it's all about slinky comfort, thin layers and less of them. You should see Serina's mauve suitâ€“and its midriff."

"Oh dear 'You Know Who'," said Megellan. "I don't think I want to."

"Neither did I," said Kedzuel. "And I told her to at least wear something underneathâ€“something a bit more professional."

"Did she listen?"

"Does she ever listen?"

"That answers that question," said Megellan with a sigh and a roll of his eyes. "But I must say, Dr. T'Soni, you do look sporting in our clothes."

"Jackie gave it to her," said Kedzuel.

"It's not bugged is it?"

"I already checked that," he said. "No, thank God. And there have been something else I've discovered that I wish to share only with

you." Kedzuel looked behind to Liara. "Megellan is probably the only other person I can truly trust with sensitive information." He glanced around, making sure no one was near. "The Asariâ€"their bioticsâ€"

"I know about Element Zero making up their construction," said Megellan. "It was something Alan briefed to me when I was on his ship."

"This changes everything, Mel," said Kedzuel. "Everything."

"I know," said Megellan. "Who else knows this?"

"Possibly Jackie and if she knows so does Serina."

Liara stepped forward: "His Majestyâ€"

"Liara," began Kedzuel.

"Kedzuel told me about what being exposed to Element Zero can do," said Liara. "But most of my people haven't really suffered any sort of affects. If King Ghidrah had the power, he would have controlled us all already, right?"

"Right," said Megellan. "Still, it is a concern. It's possible he hadn't built up the influence he needsâ€"the power he needs to take over an entire speciesâ€"it's really hard to say."

"Regardless, Liara, I'm not going to throw you in the brig," said Kedzuel. "I'm just worried what Serina might say. If she gets that informationâ€"

"Knowing how Jackie worksâ€"she probably already has it," said Megellan. "But I can always checkâ€"maybe forge a few fake files here and there."

Kedzuel smiled: "So missed you, man. I had to deal with Serina for the last 50 thousand years. I'm surprised I haven't executed her for each time she pissed me off."

"You sell yourself short," began Megellan as they began their walk back towards the Imperial Palace within the ship. "You are by far the most patient and forgiving of people I've ever known."

"Thank you," said Kedzuel.

He heard the chime sound again and Kedzuel groaned.

"It never ends!" he said.

"My Emperor, the Erde-Tyrene Admiral wishes to speak to you."

"Which one?"

"Admiral Hackett. He has brought dignitaries who wish to meet you from the planet of Sanghelios. Their ships just broke slip-space."

"Sanghelios," began Kedzuel. "Whoâ€"

"The Sangheili," said Megellan. "One of them has a famous hero named Telekâ€"Alan's superior. And I've worked with Dorva, who is serving on Alan's ship."

"Those guys," said Kedzuel. "Sangheiliâ€"Sangheliosâ€"their species is named for their planet."

"So are we," said Megellan.

"True." Kedzuel cleared his throat. "Okay, tell Admiral Hackett that I'll be there in a few minutes." He paused. "Where is Hackett?"

"On the _Cairo_, Your Majesty," replied the voice.

Kedzuel nodded: "Work calls." He looked between Megellan and Liara. "Um, since you've worked with a Sangheili longer than I haveâ€"um."

"I'll go," said Megellan. "Besides, I can't leave you alone for a second. You open your mouth, cough, and we're in another war."

"I am not that unrefined when it comes to diplomacy," said Kedzuel. "But I could use the help."

Megellan shook his head. He looked down to Liara and smiled.

"He may be the Emperor," he began. "But Kedzuel is a warrior first. He loves to let his fists talk more than his voice."

Liara smiled, letting loose a small laugh as they returned to the palace

4. IV

**1149, September 10, 2560 (Military Time)\Cairo Station**

They walked through the line of screens and steel lit by bright white florescent lamps. Kedzuel walked out in front with Megellan and Liara behind him. To his sides were his Honor Guards led by Zhane Holinau. They were dressed in their polished armor while Kedzuel was dressed in his finest robes, and Megellan only wearing his science uniform and brown jacket with the various badges adorning his sleeves. Hanging off his belt were the various contraptions that Megellan did not wish to go into much detail about their complexities. Liara had gotten back dressed in her science uniform as well, colored in drab gray and white.

Beyond in the windowed chamber, looking out over the planet Earth were the ones he was about to meet. Kedzuel turned to the planet as it rolled over to night, showing off the Oceania islands and Australia. The window had a great view of Hawaii and glowing dully orange dots were its world famous volcanoes still fuming. An old Halcyon cruiser slowly passed across the window followed by several newer Corvettes. Down below there stretched out like a slick metallic, dark mass of tiny lights was the Sangheili Assault Carrier known as the _Shadow of Intent._ Kedzuel recognized Admiral Hackett immediately, a rather tall human with graying hair and stubby beard. He stood at ease, his hands behind his back. And right beside him was Kiryuu Knight, the rather famous biomechanical dinosaur, and one of

the only remaining Earth Technomancy Masters. He was dressed in gray slacks and a gray blazer with a black turtle neck sweater. His armored, silvery tail swayed slowly behind him. Kiryuu's green, fleshy dreadlocks were pulled back in a ponytail, a few loose locks hung about his face and shoulders. Kiryuu walked out, holding his metallic claw to Kedzuel. The Emperor returned the greeting. Then, the dinosaur placed his claw upon the Blitzardi's shoulder to show him towards the two Sangheili.

Kedzuel only had the chance to meet a Sangheili once already when he met Dorva on Alan's ship. But dealing with their leaders was another matter all-together.

These Sangheili were dressed differently than Dorva, their armor polished and of a better quality than his black armor. One Sangheili was dressed in the most elaborate armor Kedzuel had seen outside his own people, with strange archaic runes and patterns adorning the layers of steely silver. His dark bodysuit was striped with grayish blue lines, looking similar to some sort of tribal tattoo. The other Sangheili was dressed in a pearly white colored armor with a large spade shape crest upon his helm. A long white cloak draped his shoulders. The one feature that struck out to Kedzuel even more than the Sangheili's rather striking green eyesâ€”were the missing pair of mandibles on Rtas' right side.

"Your Highness," began Hackett. "I'm sorry to pull you over on such short notice. Our Sangheili allies rushed hereâ€”with little notification."

"I am afraid we could not inform many of our trip," said the Sangheili with the decorative armor. "Because of our Civil War, I could not risk our plans to be foiled by the enemy."

"I understand," said Kedzuel as he slowly approached them.

"Your Highness," began Kiryuu. "This is Otto 'Gamam, the Arbiter. And his companion is Councilor Rtas 'Vadum. He is also the shipmaster of the Shadow of Intent." He leaned away to watch Kedzuel shake both Otto and Rtas' hands. "The ship that brought the Arbiter here to meet you. The Shadow of Intent is the flagship of the other half of Vice-Admiral Telek Nar 'Heros's fleet. And they flew here by the skin of their teeth to meet you. The Neru Pe 'Odosima caught wind of their plans and attacked them on route to Earth."

"The scorch marks on our ship tell the story," said Otto.

"I can understand why you could not meet with me," began Kedzuel. "Alan told me about this civil war."

"It is unfortunate," said Rtas. "It is what happened when our people found out they were lied to by their gods." His only working pair of mandibles snapped with an air of discontent. "There are still many who call us deluded fools being fed lies by the Prophets we once served in the Covenant. And many men still question whether or not our gods were right about ordering the Prophets to begin the genocide of the human species."

"Your gods," began Kedzuel. "The Forerunners?"

"Yes," said Otto.

The Emperor turned back to Megellan and wagged his head in dismay.

"You were right when you told me these guys worshiped them."

"We did," said Otto. "Most of us don't anymoreâ€"most of us are rather accepting of not having any divine hand to guide usâ€"Telek mostly. Howeverâ€"some of us still feel lost."

"Your Prophets, who are they?" Kedzuel asked.

"You mean who were they..." said Kiryuu. "They're dead, for one..."

"The San'Shyuum," said Rtas.

"The San'Shyuum?" Megellan asked. "But they were allies to the People of Erde Tyreneâ€""

Kedzuel raised a claw, silencing him before he could say more.

"Allies?" asked Otto, his honey-colored eyes widening with shock. Admiral Hackett could only reply with a shrug.

"You have to forgive my science commissioner," began Kedzuel. "He spent the last 50 thousand years as a prisoner of the Forerunners. I'm afraid he is still a little behind the times. This alliance happened before the Forerunners fired the Halos. I am afraid that the San'Shyuum you know of now as your Prophets were a completely different species that arose when the Forerunners saved your genetic code. They were brilliant at recreating life, but they could not recreate the cultures that came with that life. One of the reasons why the humans are much different now as well compared to what they looked like thousands of years ago. The humans I remembered were a bit taller than they are todayâ€"a little darker skinned, and all having dreaded up long hair and tribal markings. And these were the powerful space fairing ones we taught Technomancy to."

"They even had a different language as well," said Kiryuu. "I told Telek about this two years ago back when I was still the Ambassador of Earth in the Citadel. I'm surprised he didn't share this with you, Arbiter."

"He probably questioned whether or not I would believed him," said Otto, crossing his arms with a scowl upon his mandibles. He took in a deep breath and turned back to Kedzuel, looking into his glowing cyan blue eyes. "If there is one truth I know now is that you are who you say you are."

"Telek told us you had returned," said Rtas. "Which is why we are here. If you need resources, we are willing to provide you with them, howeverâ€""

"The war," said Otto. "I was hoping your presence and telling the council the truth of the Forerunners and their lies might finally put to rest any doubts in these upstarts' minds. So long as we remain divided, we cannot hope to help our human allies when the Reapers come." He snorted. "They even believe the Reapers are some lie Telek

told to try to garner even further support of his 'hearsay' as they are calling it." He bowed his head. "I once believed Telek was a hereticâ€"and I remind myself every day how wrong I was. I could have allowed my own species to die because of a lie if I hadn't listened to Telek. It won't happen again."

"I can tell you now that the Reapers are real," said Kedzuel. "That's why we're here. And what you just told me about these Prophetsâ€"the Covenantâ€"the Forerunnersâ€"it reminds me that we've made a big mistake in leaving. It never would have happened if we stayed." He looked back at Kiryuu. "Where is Telek? All the stories I've heard about himâ€"I'd love to meet him face to face."

"He's dealing with the insurrectionists," said Kiryuu. He crossed his arms and sighed in frustration.

"The UNSCn has personnel with Telek and his Elites," said Hackett. "We are trying to assist in stopping this war."

"And we are grateful for the UNSC in their assistance," said Otto. "It's more than we could ever ask forâ€"especially all we've done as the Covenant. We've never wanted this war to happen, but discontent bred violence. It first started with just a few preaching in open squares about how I and Telek were the liars and that the gods never left. Then, it escalated with violent bombings of political structures. The ones leading these insurrectionists is named Jul 'Mdama. He took his followers off world, but he did not leave peacefully. We would have left them alone, howeverâ€"Jul had many follows even in the Council. And they were allowed to continue their violent acts without punishment. More joined him and now here we areâ€"fighting each other when we should be preparing for the Reapers. 'Mdama continued to preach that the Reapers were nothing more than a fabrication of Telek's maddened mind, that he truly forgot what it means to be Sangheili."

"We never realized how many still did not believe him," said Rtas. "It is a long story. Telek was branded a heretic back during the Covenant days and he was supposed to be sentenced to death. But, his second in command Cujo 'Mentatl saved him along with the rest who backed him up. Tulsa 'Yurom, Tulsa 'Durosh, and Mitsu 'Kimam."

"Mitsu unfortunately was killed by Sovereign," said Kiryuu. "Along with Wago 'Tawun, the Shipmaster of the assault carrier _Regret and Reconciliation._ If anyone would question whether or not Telek was telling the truth about the Reapersâ€"would have to be reminded of all Telek lost facing Sovereignâ€"and realizing just who Sovereign was. He was able to help me figure out that the Reapers were more than just King Ghidorah's creations, they were another form of King Ghidorah."

Kedzuel took in a deep breath, nodding as he listened: "I really need to meet this guy."

"He's also faced the Flood, the creation of the Forerunners when they experimented on King Ghidorah's cells," said Kiryuu. "One of the few who seems to be immune to them, mostly due to King Ghidorah not liking what heavy alcohol does to one's nervous system."

"Really?" Megellan asked. He looked to Kedzuel. "Something new to

learn about the Hydra. Fascinating."

"I'm afraid most of what we've encountered about King Ghidorah were his Reaper form," said Kedzuel. "He's rarely shown himself in the others, but we do know of those forms. One especiallyâ€"the three headed, gold dragon."

"Our people have braved him in that form as well, long ago," said Rtas. "But as for Telek, we sent him out on a reconnaissance mission to infiltrate the Neru Pe 'Odosima."

"The Neru Pe 'Odosima," began Kedzuel. "What does that mean?"

"Servants of Abiding Truth," said Otto. "It is an ancient religious order, a couple thousands of years old. They were the ones who forbade the tampering of Forerunner artifacts for convenience, calling it the ultimate sin. Before we fought as the Covenant's military mightâ€"we fought against the San'Shyuum and their belief of studying the artifacts and bettering their lives with it. It was a bloody war."

"So full of hate were our eyes that we could not see," began Rtas. _"Our war would yield countless dead but never victory."_

"The Writ of Union," said Kiryuu. "The San'Shyuum attacked the Sangheili during that war with a Forerunner Key Shipâ€"the _Dreadnaught_ and devastated their forces. Afterwards, they joined together, forming the Covenant and around the Forerunner ship, built a gigantic, mobile holy city called High Charity. Both vessels have been destroyed during the last days of the Human/Covenant War."

"Now because of Telek figuring out the truth of the Covenant and the lies we've been told," began Rtas. "The Servants of Abiding Truth are furious, they label him the Devil, and usâ€"his demons. It's more than just a warâ€"as you can see. They honestly believe that those of us who have seen the real truth will bring down Sangheliosâ€"creating as humans call itâ€"RagnarÃ¶k?"

"Armageddonâ€"or the battle ofâ€"" said Kiryuu. "And they don't particularly like me. Butâ€"of course they don't. Not many like me."

"I like you," said Kedzuel.

"I am grateful."

Kedzuel wagged his head, his wings and tail twitching: "Wow. And you guys want me to stop thisâ€"'RagnarÃ¶k' before it gets too out of hand, huh? Yikes. We're gone for a few ten thousand years and all Gehenna breaks loose."

Zhane huffed, pulling his metallic helm from his face. He passed to Kedzuel's side with a smooth, fluid step, his eyes narrowing.

"You can't possibly think that we should get involved in such matters," he began. "We're beyond their petty squabbles."

"Zhane, are you my bodyguard, or my advisor?" Kedzuel asked, taking note of Otto's cold expression on the Blitzardi's sudden

opinion.

"Your bodyguard, Emperor."

"Then keep your mouth shut and guard my body!" Kedzuel returned his attention to the Arbiter. "I'm terribly sorry: He's an idiot. Too pumped full of Blitzardi pride and arrogance and not a drop of humility when it comes to helping those who would in return help us in our time of need." He wagged his head, the golden ornaments twisting around a few of his dreaded locks clinking against the golden leaves about his shoulders. "Apparently, my Honor Guard has forgotten an important guideline of diplomacy. If we want the Sangheili to scratch our backs, we have to be willing to scratch theirs, and do it with true Blitzardi gusto."

"Is there any other type?" Megellan asked, smirking.

"If there comes a time when there is one better than Blitzardi gusto, I'd love to see it," said Kedzuel. "I will do my best to be of some assistance to you. Butâ€"because of certain limitationsâ€"I can only do so much. We need to repair the other ships as soon as we can and hopefully before the Reapers come. And as you've may have heardâ€"we've got gigantic ships."

"And some of ours are nearly as big," said Rtas. "We would be the ones you should go to for such assistance. We're used to working on gigantic ships."

"And their technology is based on the Forerunners," said Kiryuu. "Which means that it is compatible with Technomancy, whether or not they use it. Because of the religious importance to the Covenant of keeping what they built from reverse engineering Forerunner techâ€"they've included much of what they did not know about in the design."

"I can vouch for that," said Megellan. "After spending some time with a Hurogok named Swiftyâ€"Telek's main engineer officerâ€"I was allowed to tour Telek's ship. The only thing they lack is our space-fold technology. The Forerunners could never figure that outâ€"along with our ability to create tiny pocket dimensions within our ships. But they were very astute on Slipspace storage. They just could not figure out the Holtzmann Effect nor how to utilize it."

"Holtzmann Effect," said Kiryuu.

"It is the secret to how we are able to fold space," said Megellan. "Traveling without moving. Why there is one pilot for each shipâ€"there can be only one who is capable of seeing the pathways through the dimensions and guide the ship safely. Kedzuel and many other ship pilots use a very limited form of prescienceâ€"so that the ship arrives within the time it left without dilation and then tells the ship to that spot in spaceâ€"while still occupying the same time."

"And then the ship brings that space to it," said Kedzuel. "It's like grabbing a piece of table cloth on the far end and dragging it to youâ€"but at the same time, pushing the end closest to you away. The ship does not move, but the space does. The ship stays still, only having the space move around it."

"Traveling without moving," said Kiryuu. "Now I understand."

The biomecha looked to Liara who was very silent during the meeting. However, he could see the lights sparking in her eyes as she began to work out how the mechanics of the Precursor technology on space traveling worked. Kiryuu grinned.

"The Forerunners never learned this technology," said Otto.

"Because we never gave it to them," said Kedzuel. "But we did give it to the humansâ€"which is why they proved to be rather formidable against the Forerunners because their ships were capable of instantaneous travel. Where it would take a Forerunner ship to cross the whole disk of the galaxy within one month in Slipspace travel, we can do it in two seconds so long as we are able to see a clear path. That is why I need visual coordinates to fold space. However, since what the Forerunners did 50 thousand years ago, the technology we taught our allies has been lost."

"The Forerunners were sore losers about it," said Megellan. "They devolved humanity when they found out we chose them to take over the Mantle of Protection for this galaxy."

"You never taught the Forerunners anything?" asked Rtas.

"No," said Megellan. "They stole every bit of it. None of what they were capable of doing was earned."

"Well, you've heard it from the horse's mouth, as it were," said Hackett. He looked back at the Sangheili, seeing them turning to look at each otherâ€"speaking in their strange, growling, guttural language. Then, Otto returned his gaze to Kedzuel.

"My friend and student, Telek 'Heros must hear of this as well," he said. "But since he is handling the Servants of Truthâ€"oh how I wish he was here right now. We hope to bring you back to Sanghelios and you tell the Council what you've told us. Perhaps hearing it from you will stop this war, Emperor Kedzuel."

Kedzuel wagged his head: "Unfortunately it won't stop your war. I've seen this before, even with the truth right in front of them, people like this Jul 'Mdama will only hear what they want to hear. And I don't want to be seen as a bully, kicking around the weak. He bowed his head. "I'm sorryâ€"I honestly don't know how to help without showing force. And my Council will not allow me to deploy troops unless it is for the purpose of fighting Reapers."

"I still have many in the Council who support the Arbiter and Telek," said Rtas. "I'll see if I can soften the blow if force is necessary."

Megellan touched Kedzuel's arm: "I hate for us to lose very valuable allies, Kedzuel. After all, they would know more than the others on how to assist in the repairs of the Shi-Class ships."

"You can't be considering this," said Zhane.

Kedzuel sighed heavily.

"Iâ€"I cannot speak for all my people, but I can speak for myself," he began. "And I am in control of my ship." He huffed, crossing his arms. A spark of plasma ignited between his curved horns, running along inside of the curves. "Yes, Zhane, I'm considering this."

"I cannot allowâ€" "

"Shut up," said Kedzuel. "The Reapers will be here in two or three months. I'm out of time. And I've got three ships built, with so many corners cut that I don't know if they'll pass Pluto without throwing a bolt."

"Yes, sir," said Zhane.

"Arbiter, I will try my best to help tell the truth to your people," said Kedzuel. "They deserve to hear it right from those of us who were there."

The Arbiter nodded, silently speaking with Rtas again. Kedzuel turned to Liara, who only shrugged as the two Sangheili spoke with each other in their strange language. Then, the silence broke with a grunt from Kiryuu. He leaned over, holding his head as his golden eyes started glowing cyanâ€"the same color as Kedzuel's and the other Precursors. Three stripes appeared on his cheeks, and a glowing, ghostly bundle of streamersâ€"cordsâ€"grew out from the back of his head.

"The pirate is in trouble!"

Kedzuel held his breath when he heard the sound of that commanding, disembodied voice. Kiryuu leaned back, his eyes wide as he took in a virtual breath, his processors skipping a beat at the sound of that voice. He gathered himself, shaking from the shock.

"Did anyone hear that?" Kiryuu asked. Hackett, the Arbiter, and Rtas shook their heads. However, Kedzuel, Megellan and the other Precursors nodded. Liara stood there, confused.

"Who's the pirate?" asked Zhane.

Just as Kiryuu was about to reply, he leaned down and held his head again. Green dreads fell into his eyes. Kiryuu smoothed them back away from his face and a sneer crawled up his lips.

"I have recieved a distress call from Captain Jimenez," he said. "He is the current captain of the _Silent Wrath_, a Super Carrier under Telek's command. He, Telek, Cujo, and Tulsa are being pursued by the Neru Pe 'Odosima. Tom's informed me that they've all attempted to scatter, but somehow, the Servants of Abiding Truth have seen through their cloaks."

"By the gods how?" asked Rtas.

"Tom doesn't know," said Kiryuu.

"We specifically upgraded the _Shadow of Darkness _with more efficient heat sinks and a tougher cloak just for the purpose of keeping an eye on the Servants of Abiding Truth and their leader. No one can catch Telek! Not even the Prophet of Truth." His expression soften as he lowered his head. "Not even I could catch him." A smile

spread across his mandibles. "I taught him well."

"There must be a device they are using to sniff Admiral Telek out," said Megellan. "Has his Technomancers detected anything coming from the ships?"

"Red dots," said Kiryuu, feeling the energy feeding directly to him from Tom's own connection to the Array. "They don't know what they are. And they're still not trained well enough to even understand the information that _she _is feeding them."

"She?" asked Liara.

"Uhâ€"long story," said Kiryuu.

"Did you say red dots?" asked Kedzuel.

"Yes," said Kiryuu. "What do they mean?"

"Strange Energy," said Megellan. "Far Realm contamination."

"More specifically King Ghidorah," said Kedzuel.

"What?" Otto asked, his mandibles spreading, the brown color of his skin fading. "The Parasite is on those ships?"

"Parasite," began Megellan. "Yes, that is a fitting name for the Hydra."

Kiryuu closed his eyes as the glow of his cords intensified. The information flowing from the back of his head, down the cords disappeared into nothing at the tips. Kedzuel reached out to Otto, placing his coppery golden claw upon the Arbiter's shoulder.

"I might be able to help," he said. "My ship can be there in a matter of seconds."

"I was about to suggest that," said Kiryuu.

"Thank you, Kedzuel," said Otto.

Kedzuel nodded and shifted his gaze back to Kiryuu: "Where are they?"

"They were spying on a planet called Laqil," said Otto, looking at Hackett. "It's called New Llanelli by the UNSC. It was a human colony that was glassed by the Covenant Navy."

"One man survived the glassing," said Hackett. "But so far, the colony was abandoned. After Telek informed the Arbiter, he then reported back to the Office of Naval Intelligence to find out what it was on that planet that Mdama was interested in." His eyes narrowed at Kiryuu. "Cerberus had a base thereâ€"though they also abandoned it when it was glassed."

"Cerberus," said Kiryuu. "Damn it. And somehow these rogue Sangheili have figured out how to see through Telek's cloak. I want to know how!"

"No one wants that more than me, Mr. Knight," said Otto. "If you can

save Telek, it'll help us find out what they're up to. Surely, Telek's discovered something before he was attacked. It'll help put an end to this war."

"And using Element Zero is outlawed with the Sangheili as well," said Kiryuu.

"Yes, it is," said Rtas. "It'll ruin Mdamas and his followers faces if the Council catches wind of this travesty."

"Potentially using Strange Energy, I think that will keep Serina quiet," said Kedzuel.

"Do you have Telek's position, Mr. Knight?" asked Hackett, bracing his hands against his love handles.

"He is in slipspace transit," said Kiryuu, his eyes becoming unfocused as he gathered the information. "Does that matter, Your Majesty?"

"My ship can find him," said Kedzuel. "I just need those visual coordinates."

"How?" asked Kiryuu. "Slipspace is black, featureless. There are no electromagnetic frequencies equal to that of visible light to see anything."

"Tell Tom and any Technomancers serving under Telek to create a ripple through the Array," said Kedzuel. "I'll pick up on the signature and find them. Then, I'll be able to properly phase into real space get them out of danger."

"You're not engaging the enemy?" asked Rtas.

"The _Shi'lithra _space worthy, but not combat ready," said Kedzuel. "We have yet to properly test the weapon systems. However, she does have shields and I like to see these cultists tear through them. There is one thing I need to know, how big is Telek's ship—or the other ships that are with him?"

"It is nearly 30 kilometers in length," said Otto. "And 4 kilometers in height."

"Telek has two super carriers and one _Reverence_-class battle cruiser and one super cruiser. The _Shadow of Darkness_, the _Silent Wrath_, the _Divine Journey_, and the _Righteous Fury._"

"And two of those ships are over a quarter of the _Shi'lithra's _length," said Kedzuel, running a claw through his medium auburn brown hair. "I'm gonna need a bigger ship!" He looked back at the Lengodo, his brow arching with cold worry. "Uh, Mel, how are we going to do this?"

"We'd have to dump some of the levels," said Megellan. "Then, you'll have to combine the two pocket dimensions into one in order to fit both super carriers side by side. The other ships can sit either above or below the two super carriers."

"Good gracious," said Kedzuel. "I'm gonna have a headache after this."

Kiryuu disconnected and sighed: "Do what you need to do. I've informed everyone in the fleet what to do to help you catch up to them."

"Thirty minutes," said Kedzuel. "We'll be there in thirty minutes. And we'll just dump those sections along the way."

"But if you dump the sections, can you get them back?" asked Liara.

"Yes," said Kedzuel. "We can."

Kiryuu walked toward Liara and placed a silvery claw upon her shoulder.

"Dr. T'Soni, I need you for something while Kedzuel saves Telek," he said.

"What?" Liara asked.

"It is a personal science project of mine," said the biomecha. "When Kedzuel comes back from dealing with the Servants of Abiding Truthâ€"he will need to test the weapon used to defeat the Reapers with on something. I need your help to prepare it."

Liara smiled at Kiryuu: "I'd love to help you, Kiryuu."

"I do appreciate it, I need your expertise in this."

"I hope you don't mind, Your Majesty," said Liara.

"Oh, no," said Kedzuel. "I'll save Telek, talk to the Sangheili Council and be back before you know it." He turned back to Otto. "Don't worry, he's in good hands."

"Thank you," said Otto.

Kedzuel bowed and then he and Megellan and his Honor Guards vanished in a flash of cyan and golden electrical sparks. Hackett crossed to the Otto 'Gamam and held out a hand.

"I can see what I can do to allow both of you and your crew to stay here until it's safe for you to return, Arbiter," he said.

"We would appreciate it," said Otto.

"Yes," said Rtas.

"Arbiter, Councilor Rtas," began Kiryuu. "You are guests at my estate. I can think of no safer place than my summer home in the quiet country side of northern California. You can relax there. Besides, it's the least I can do for an old friend."

He held out his claw and Otto took it. Liara tilted her head, her blue eyes sparkled with a soft smile spreading across her lips. She turned to Hackett, taking in a deep breath.

"It's hard to believe that they were once enemies," she said.

"President Knight" and Supreme Commander Otto 'Gaman?' asked Hackett. "Yes, hard to believe, though they've never met each other when they were. Just two people on opposite sides of the war" the only connection they had was Telek. Otto kicked him out of his fleet only for Kiryuu to offer Telek a job with the UNSC Navy."

Admiral Hackett looked on when he felt the windows begin to vibrate. The dark specks of starlight was obstructed by a massive, angular shape and flashes of blue electricity racing up and down its sides. Then, the mass vanished and the space around it wobbled just for a little bit to indicate that it was still there before returning to normal. Kedzuel had left upon his ship, already heading out without a clearance from Space Command. His ship did not need any clearance"when it left"it left and not a trace of it ever being there was seen.

5. V

****V****

****_1215, September 10, 2560 (Military Time)\Shadow of Darkness_****

The _Shadow of Darkness _shivered and rattled. Sparks sprayed as she sped through the ethers. Telek gripped his command chair with pale knuckles. He felt the ship jerk, causing him to slam his arm against the hard, metallic arm of his command chair.

"Engine 3 is sputtering," said Rolu.

"If I have to get out and push," began Telek. "I will." He leaned over, pressing a flashing button on his chair. "Cujo, tell me how you're holding."

"As good as any," said Cujo as his face appeared on the forward screen. He flinched at the sound of something crashing behind him and a white spark flashing on the ceiling. "How the hell did those assholes take out our shields?"

"I don't know," said Telek. "Tulsa, Tom, updates!"

"Bad things are happening!" Tom cried as his face appeared in the lower corner of the holographic screen. His eyes were bulging out of his sockets, his tanned face pale.

"Thanks for the update, Tom," said Telek.

"Looks like Tom is freaking out," said Tulsa.

"Yeah," said Telek, sighing as he leaned back against his chair. "I noticed. Tom, get your shit together. That's an order."

"Yes, sir."

"Give me a status update on our rescuers," said Telek.

"He said he'll be here in 15 minutes," said Tom. "But that was 10 minutes ago."

"I'm surprised we lasted this long," said Tulsa.

Telek gripped the arms of his chair tightly again as he felt his ship shake: "We'll survive the five minutes."

Tulsa grunted, leaning down as a flash sparked behind him. He covered his head with his arms. Then, he looked back up at the screen.

"If only I had your optimism, Telek."

"Telek," began Cujo. "Those assholes disabled my plasma cannon. I can't snipe them."

Telek growled, looking up at the flickering lights above. He turned to hear the sound of a bridge crew-member howl in pain. The red-armored Sangheili held to his arm, the black body suit torn, exposing his flesh. Tele slammed his finger on a glowing green button on the arm of his chair.

"Erin," he began. "Send a medic up here. We've got injured."

"Right away."

Telek turned around to the screen Tom's face was on.

"How long has it been now?"

"Two minutes," replied Tom.

Telek rose from his seat again, turning back at the sound of hooves clacking against steel and carpet. He saw his olive and gold armored head surgeon come walking in with several drab colored Major-domos in pale red. Telek lowered his seat down, waling over to help the bridge-man up.

"Thank goodness we've installed those teleporters," said Erin. "This ship is too big."

"Tell me about it," said Telek.

Erin pulled out a cooling pack, looking down at the electrical burn in the Sangheili's arm. He placed the pack upon the burn and helped the Sangheili up. Telek helped Erin lay the wounded crewman onto a hover gurney. The ship shivered again and Telek toppled over to the floor, slamming into one of the chairs where the other bridge crewmen sat at.

"Excellency," began a black-armored crewman. She leaned down to help Telek to his feet. As Telek came to his feet, he looked to Cujo's screen.

"I guess they're still after us," he said.

"That is an affirmative," replied Cujo.

"Joli, Rolu," began Telek.

"Plasma torpedo locked on our aft engines, sir," said Rolu.

"Fire aft phasers," said Telek.

"Aye, aye," said Rolu.

His black, gloved hands whirled down the hard-light panels. Upon the screen, he could see the smaller cruiser closing in on him and the reticule flashing red, centering the ship within range of the phasers.

"Target locked," said Rolu. "Firing."

Rolu could see the blue-white plasma cannon fire upon the bow of the attacking ship and the screen flickered as the beam impacted.

"Admiral," began Tom. "I have an idea. If we all get close together, I can create a Technomantic shield around all four ships. Me and the Technomancers on board can."

"No," said Telek. "You'll fry your brain doing that. I don't want you a vegetable. I like my Shipmasters to be able to command."

Tom flinched at the sound of an explosion behind him, the screen lighting up white.

"It's better than getting ourselves fried, Telek!"

"Excellency," began Joli. "If he can produce a shield large enough to protect our shipsâ€"wellâ€"it would save us. I don't know how long we can keep this up. Their weaponsâ€"are superior."

"Telek, let him," said Cujo. "Whatever they got on their ship, it's trumping even the heavy firepower of your own."

Telek took in a deep breath, his face grimacing. At first, he was wagging his head. The last thing he wanted was to lose another one of his team. Then, after a moment of silence, the Sangheili Pirate finally nodded in defeat.

"Alright," he said. "Do it."

"Roger," said Tom. His brown eyes started glowing cyan blue and each side of his face bore the single, black, triangular stripe. Telek could see the glowing cyan cord bundles grow out from the back of the human's head. Tom took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, raising his hands up. All around the four ships of Telek's fleet, grew a large, fluctuating bubble of blue-white energy, radiating out from the Silent Wrath, and covering all ships protectively. Telek could see the strain in Tom's face as he held to the enormous shield, fueling it with the power he was downloading. It was never about Tom's own personal power creating this shield, it was how much power could he download safely and withstand, how much power output he could command before the burn-out happened. The power the Technomancers seemed to all possess was unlimited, the only limitations was set by how much they could take before the power itself fried their bodies. Joli ran his fingers across the glowing panels, seeing on his screens the attacking ships continuing to fire upon them. Their weapons exploded harmlessly upon the shield.

"It's working!" Joli said.

Telek looked at the screen, seeing Tom Jimenez strain.

"Tom," he said. "Come on."

"It'sâ€"passed 15 minutes," said Tom and Telek could hear the strain in his voice. "They'reâ€"late."

"Just hold on," said Telek.

On the other side, where Tom was, his body was shaking as it started glowing blue-white. He could feel every fiber of his muscles cry out in agony, ripping as he forced the energy outward. His other Technomancers were feeding into the shield as well, helping with the load, but still, keeping such a huge shield up was even too much for them.

_"Tom," _began a voiceâ€"the voice Tom recognized as the Array. Though, he had to admit, this was the first time the Array decided to talk to him with such a natural timbre. Normally, it only spoke to him, feeding him hollow information. The Array actually sounded concerned. **_"Tom, disconnect. You're drawing too much of my power into yourself. You can't take this much."_**

Tom shook. Telek could see a drop of dark crimson running out of the human's left nostril.

_"Tom," _said the voice again. **_"Let go. They are here. Time to disconnect from me."_**

Tom felt the coldness of the disconnection as the Array itself withdrew from his mind. The glow ceasing from his body, and Tom dropped face down upon his bridge.

"Tom!" Telek called. "Tom!"

"Tom!" said Cujo. "What the hell happened?"

"God fucking damn it!" Telek bellowed, slamming his fist upon the rim of the hard light emitters. The screens vibrated when he punched one of the emitters, and the images of Cujo and Tulsa wavered and jumped, scrolling for one moment. As the emitter re-calibrated, their images became clear again. Telek looked up just as he saw something flash upon Tom's screen. There, he saw an armored being upon the screen, silvery armor and a draconic-looking helm and horns. The strange, armored creature knelt down and took Tom into its arms. Then, it vanished.

"The hell?" Telek asked. "Did Tom's ship just got boarded?" He pressed a button upon the hard-light screen. "Xebar, do you read me?"

A black and gold Sangheili appeared upon the screen of Tom's ship and nodded.

"Yes, Excellency," he replied. "Aliens, aliens boarded our ship and took our Shipmaster. They were so quick, we couldn't stop them."

"Excellency!" began Rolu. "Look!"

Telek looked to the enormous screen showing the two flanking cruisers. Then, in a bright, flash of light, one of the cruisers suddenly vanished.

"The hell?" Telek asked.

"Did you see that?" Cujo asked.

"Rolu, did that ship drop from Slipspace?" Telek asked.

"Iâ€"don't know," said Rolu. "It just vanished."

Then, the second cruiser following them vanished, followed by the third and then the fourth. Finally, it was just their ships that were left. Telek gasped as the black sky became blue, as if he was looking out at the atmosphere of a planet. The ships were bathed in the golden glow of a star. Telek looked around at the screens, seeing billowing clouds off in the distance. Though upon further inspection, Telek thought he saw two other Covenant Super Carrier over the rise of the small ridges that the clouds were rolling over. And there were two smaller ships below them. It was like he was looking at a mirror image.

"What the hell happened?" Telek asked.

"Excellency," began Joli. "I think we just landed upon a planet."

"Where the hell did this planet come from?" Telek asked.

"Is that our ships?" Cujo asked. "I'm sending a signal at them andâ€"the signal seems to be looping back around at us. Those are our ships!"

Rolu's brown eyes looked over to a flashing pink, triangle upon the hard-light control panel.

"Supreme Commander," he began. "Someone is trying to contact us."

"Bring them up."

"Yes, sir."

A trapezoid-shaped holographic screen faded in beside Cujo's screen. The person on the screen looked to be a dragon with a humanoid-like torso and a lupine-like head covered in coppery golden scales. Golden branched, curled horns grew out from his head and his pointed ears twitched. Ornate golden beads decorated his braided, auburn and silver streaked hair. A pair of membraned red wings folded to his back. A smile appeared upon his face. Two glowing cyan eyes sparkled and Telek could see the three triangular markings upon his cheeks.

"Admiral Telek 'Heros," began the dragon.

"Yeah?" said Telek. "Who are you?"

"Emperor Kedzuel Draconis."

Telek took in a deep breath and exhaled, slumping his shoulders.

"Took you long enough," he said.

"Sorry about that," said Kedzuel. "It's not easy folding space without a proper visual reference." He shrugged. "I had to grab those other ships and test them out if they belong to you. Then, I dropped them off out of slipspace and away from you."

"And did you pick up a human named Tom?" asked Telek.

"I didn't," said Kedzuel. "I sent one of my medics out though. Looks like he was trying to do something that was a bit too advanced for his level. Though he's got some spunk in him to pull it off. That, I have to admire."

Telek licked his mandibles, swallowing: "I'm hoping he's alright."

"He is," said Kedzuel.

"Thankâ€"whoever," said Telek.

"I'll be sending over some technicians to help with the repairs, but I'm afraid for now, your ships are out of commission until they are done."

Telek settled back into his chair.

"Do they know how my ships work?"

"Megellan has informed them," said Kedzuel. "And because your ships are very similar to the Forerunner ships, repairing them shouldn't be a problem. May I ask permission to come aboard?"

"Yeah, you can come aboard."

"Thank you."

As the screen disappeared, Telek turned to the ones that still held Cujo and Tulsa.

"I want you two on board as well and in the meeting room in ten minutes."

"Yes, Excellency," said Tulsa.

"Gotcha, Telek," said Cujo. "We'll be there."

Then, their screens vanished. Telek turned to hear the sound of electricity sparking along the floor. Just as soon as the sparking happened, they flashed in. He recognized the green one with the uniform, he was just as tall as Telek, the Lengodo named Megellan. The other dressed in a little fancier clothing was the gold and copper Precursor who called himself Emperor Kedzuel Draconis. The Emperor stood a good head and a half taller than Megellan, filled out with harden muscles of a warrior under the drapery of robes. His auburn long hair was tied in those golden, ornate bobbles at the tips

of his braids. Megellan waved at Telek. Telek only grunted. However, Kedzuel kept still, waiting for the Supreme Commander to make his move. All around, the Sangheili rose up, pulling their plasma rifles out, aiming them right at the two new arrivals.

"Just pop right in, that's fine," said Telek, gripping his chest from the shock. He waved at the other Sangheili, motioning them to lower their weapons. "Hardly any warning at all."

The Sangheili crew lowered their weapons and sat back down, though their dark eyes still remained upon the two Kethosians.

"Sorry about that, Admiral," said Megellan. He stepped away, motioning towards his companion. "Emperor Kedzuel wanted to see you right away and since I was the one who has been on this ship, I teleported him in myself."

"After all, your ship is inside of my ship," said Kedzuel.

"Is that what that is right there?" Telek asked as he pointed to the screen filled with the blue sky and clouds. He noticed the sun beginning to set, turning the rim of the blue sky orange. "Your ship?"

"Yes," said Kedzuel.

"You have some sort of environment inside your ship, like the Halos?"

"No," said Megellan. "This is a pocket dimension aboutâ€"well nowâ€"due to what we had to jettison to make it large enough to house your ship with breathing room to spareâ€"about 100 miles in each direction."

"A hundred miles?" Telek asked.

"It's normally 20," said Kedzuel. "Twenty miles is all this ship has the power to support aside from all the other functions. And your and Captain Jimenez's ships are about a quarter the size of my own. I had no choice but to stretch the pocket dimension, so we had to dump several levels to find enough power to fuel such a size."

"Good God," said Telek.

"And to build thisâ€"my head now hurts," said Kedzuel. He raised his claw to his brow.

"You built this with your mind?" Telek heard Joli ask. The helmsman turned around to stare at the Precursor leader with wide eyes.

"Yes," said Kedzuel.

"Shit, if Tom tried to do any of this, his brain would melt right out of his nose," said Telek.

Kedzuel chuckled: "None of that happens with me. I've had a long enough time to exercise that muscle in order to get it to work. But doesn't mean I don't get a bit of a headache from it. Once it's built, no more pain. Building is a pain. Hope you like lots and lots

of grass. Cuz that's what I filled the new field with. Grass."

"I can deal with grass," said Telek.

"Good," said Kedzuel. "Best I could come up with in 15 minutes." He crossed his arms. "I'm happy enough that I didn't create a huge desert to fill the gap between the two pocket dimensions that I bridged them with. Kethoi is nothing but a giant desertâ€"I hate deserts." Kedzuel walked towards Telek, holding his claw out. "Wellâ€"

"It's about time we met," said Telek as he took the claw into his gloved hand.

"I was about to say the same thing," said Kedzuel. "Alan was the one who told me about this civil war. And the Arbiter told me the rest. These Covenant Remnants are using something dangerous."

"Yeah," said Telek. "So it seems from what Tom informed me after you informed him. Reaper tech. Damned bastards." The big Sangheili crossed his arms. "I'm glad Otto drugged your ass out here. I need a miracle. I used to be called the Miracle Worker back during the latter years of the Covenant/Human Warâ€"when I worked with the UNSC. Seems all that magic's left me now in my old age. Now, if you would just follow me. I've told Tulsa and Cujo to get to my ship. Tomâ€"

"He'll be alright," said Megellan.

"I worry about the kid," said Telek. "I lost Davisâ€"I don't want to lose him too. Without Davis' Technomancy, I never would have found Kiryuu on that planetâ€"never would have seen King Ghidorah rise up againâ€"having all he needed to start powering his Reapers again. This Reaper shitâ€"it's mine and Kiryuu's fault it's happening now."

"No it isn't," said Kedzuel. "It would've happened no matter what you did."

He motioned for Kedzuel and Megellan to follow him to the tri-valve door at the end of the bridge. He heard the door chime softly and deeply, the red lights turning green and the door folding open to allow them to leave. They walked through the enormous corridors, dimly lit by the glow of pink and purple lights running along the corners of the corridor. Kedzuel looked upon the oily metallic blue walls, seeing sparks of blue race across the black corners. He could hear the soft pulse of the engines. He turned to hear the hard clack of heavy boots and found a huge, hulking creature, armored in dark blueâ€"taller than himâ€"walk by. The creature wore a great shield upon one arm and a canon, glowing green, upon the other. Between the armor of the creature was its orange skin, or what Kedzuel thought was skin. Another creature exactly like the first walked up behind it. Both rumbled at Kedzuel as he passed them. The Blitzardi sniffed, noticing the strange scent of sharp burning rubber and citrus.

"Lekgolo," said Megellan. "Those creatures are a colony of sentient worms. Interesting creatures."

"A colony of worms huh?" Kedzuel said. "Very strange." He leaned

closer to Megellan. _"Dou echixae h'xeo."_

_"Hi t'dau," _said Megellan with a snicker.

Tele looked back at his guests: "You two behave yourselves back there. I'd hate for yuins ending up being trophies for some of my more rough crewmen."

"I think I can take them on," said Kedzuel.

Telek chuckled as he wagged his head.

"So what Megellan said about you Blitzardi is true. Try not to have too much of a hot head here, Your Highness. I'd hate to have an intergalactic dispute on my ship."

Kedzuel gave a chuckle and then rushed to the maroon-armored Supreme Commander.

"Admiral," he began. "There's something I've wanted to ask you about once I knew we'd finally meet."

"And what is that?" asked Telek.

"The Flood," said Kedzuel. "One of King Ghidrah's forms. You've encountered them much?"

"A lot, in fact, in the latter year and a half towards the war's ending, we discovered those monsters on a Shield Installation about 35 years ago when the Covenant was finishing up on glassing Harvest. And then another outbreak on Halo 04 later on in the war. But what could I tell you that you probably already don't know?"

"We don't know everything," said Kedzuel.

"You knew enough to find a cure," said Telek.

The Blitzardi lowered his head.

"We were close to one," said Megellan. "But close doesn't cut it. The Forerunners destroyed the facility on Charrum Hakkor and the files went with it."

"Megellan came close to fighting them," began Kedzuel. "I have never fought them. But youâ€"you survived them."

"Never fought the Reapers either?" asked Telek.

"Only from the inside of a ship," replied Kedzuel. He heard a disapproving grunt from the Sangheili and the Blitzardi continued in his own defense. "Not my choice in the matter. I was under orders from the previous Emperor."

"Your uncle."

"Right."

"So, you're a little wet behind the ears when it comes to fighting those monsters," said Telek with a heavy sigh.

"Yes," said Kedzuel. "When I was informed that you've dealt with themâ€"himâ€"in his many forms, I knew I would need to keep a close contact with you. You can help me fill in the gaps."

"Trial by error," said Telek, turning back to the taller Blitzardi. His face grew grim. "That's all I can say. But no one outside of perhaps Kiryuu, Otto, the Master Chief, and my Shipmasters have taken such a fight so seriously. This thing that monster is, he's the stuff of nightmares. Those stupid people on the Citadel Council, they know nothing. But I can tell you. I can tell you a lot more than any other. And then there's Kiryuu. Both he and I know what it means to be possessed by that monster. He takes away the mind and leaves emptiness. Never been so scared of the dark until I came across King Ghidorah. I'm lucky I can sleep at night. If it weren't for my pickled liver, I'd be drinking myself senseless right now."

Kedzuel sighed, wagging his head. He looked back at Megellan, seeing a sullen, sallow green shade growing across his cheeks. The Emperor agreed with his growing sickness.

"The Reapers did not return in the last cycle," began Kedzuel. "All because the Forerunners had created a new weapon form him to use, and it did not take as much resources to make it as it would the Reapers themselves." He flipped a lock behind his shoulder. "And King Ghidorah could spread his virus across the galaxy swiftly. I am wondering if he would choose now to use both. Has the Flood been completely destroyed?"

"No," said Telek. "It hasn't. There's still Halos leftâ€"Halos filled with the Flood. And Forerunner facilities also filled with the Flood. I couldn't even begin to count how much of it is out there. Like a bomb waiting to be set off. And then there's the Shield Installationsâ€"againâ€"with Flood. Much like the one on Pandora and the one discovered during the glassing of Harvest. They're everywhere." He cleared his throat. "I wouldn't put it passed that snake to try and use the Flood again. Why put all your eggs in one basket?"

They finally came down to a tri-valve door and it opened up with a chime. Sitting in the room was a silver-armored Sangheili with a leaner physique than what Kedzuel had seen from many of the other Sangheili he's met. Sitting down upon the table next to this Sangheili was a blue heart-shaped stone and a rather short human with curly hair and gold eyes and a very loud, peacock blue suit.

"Damn it, Shri," began Telek. "What the hell are youâ€"what's Casper doing here?"

"He insisted on coming to meet our guests," said Shri.

The short human stood up and walked over to Kedzuel and held out his hand.

"Hello, Emperor Kedzuel," he said.

"Hello," said Kedzuel, taking the man's hand. "Who's this?"

"Your Highness, this is former President Dunkelzahn Mountainshadow," began Telek. "Kiryuu's predecessor."

As Kedzuel took the human's hand, he noticed how deathly cold it was. The Blitzardi snatched it back.

"Yeeooww!" he called. "That's cold!"

"Sorry about that," said Dunkelzahn. "I've came up with a bad case of being deceased."

"You're a ghost?" Megellan asked. "Admiral, you never told me you had a ghost on your ship. Alan's never told me. Does Alan know?"

"The correct phrase is Free Spirit," said Dunkelzahn. "And yes, Alan knows."

"Alan's the one who fetched him outta that ghost townâ€"Chicago," said Telek. "And that be another thing you need to know. King Ghidorah's got a bunch of monsters called the Invae under his command as well. Cujo and Alan ran into those creatures as well as my old pal Dovi 'Canthonâ€"Shri's baby brother."

"He certainly did," said Shri. "I've never fought them myself, but from what Dovi could tell meâ€"they were nasty creatures. And they did the same as the Flood would doâ€"change your genetic code with a retrovirus. One bite from those creatures and you turn into giant insect monsters. The main hive mind of that group is called Megaguirus, an extension of King Ghidorah's presence in Chicago."

"So far, the Earth Technomancers have done all they could to keep that city contained," said Dunkelzahn. "Butâ€"I have a fishy feeling it's not going to last. Not with the Reapers coming. Which is why I wanted to speak to both of you, especially you Commissioner Megellan. Maybe you could shed some light on this."

Telek motioned for the two Kethosi to sit down. Dunkelzahn sat right beside Megellan.

"If I may ask, how did you die?" Megellan asked the Free Spirit.

"I committed suicide," said Dunkelzahn.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Depression?"

"No, a sense of duty," said Dunkelzahn. "As you know, King Ghidorah has a particular habit of returning to Earth every few thousand years. And as he does itâ€"he raises the level of Mana to do it." He cleared his throat. "You see, not only am I a Free Spirit, but I am a Free Spirit of a Western Dragon. Malcho was my surrogate father and mentor during my development. I was a Great Western Dragon by the time I decided to destroy my body for I had gained enough power to completely be rid of it in order to protect Earth. It was my deathâ€"and myself as a Free Spirit that kept King Ghidorah from returning to Earth for over 500 yearsâ€"long enough for humans to become what they are now."

"Some sacrifice," said Kedzuel.

"I'm proud to have done it. Though I do miss the taste of food. I have to say, since your returnâ€"I've learned something about Papa Malcho that I never thought I would. I did not know that he turned

himself into a cyborg."

Megellan and Kedzuel chuckled.

"That was my sister's idea," said Kedzuel. "She had Megellan help her in his transformation. It was the only way to allow a Great Dragon to manipulate Technomancy. We could alter human DNA to use Technomancy without cybernetics, but Malchoâ€"we found because of hisâ€"kindâ€"how it evolved from King Ghidorah's energy, the Array kept rejecting him. So, we forced it into him. We turned him into a cyborg. I see that he used some of that knowledge and technology we built into him to help build Kiryuu with."

Dunkelzahn smiled, nodding.

"Yes, without Malcho's own genius, Gordon Knight would never had been able to bring Kiryuu to life."

"So, you've also faced King Ghidorah," said Kedzuel.

"I have faced him in his astral form," said Dunkelzahn.

"I suppose you can accept him as another who's got some info on how to fight King Ghidorah," said Telek. "I've never fought his astral form before. Though, I've seen itâ€"a lot. When he possessed me, it was Dunkelzahn who helped snap me out of it. And Dunkelzahn who kicked my but out into space again to go find Kiryuuâ€"which led me to Alanâ€"and that led me to Kiryuu."

Kedzuel turned back to the ghost: "Then, I am glad to meet you. I've never fought his astral form either."

"Your input into this would help a lot," said Megellan. "If there is a way we can defeat King Ghidorah on all fronts, not just in the physicalâ€" He broke off, lifting an emerald green claw to his black hair, combing it through. "The _Shi _ships are specially designed to banish him from the Prime Plane. Where we send himâ€"well where we attempt to send him is back to the Far Realm."

"Do you just send his body there?" Dunkelzahn asked.

"Yes," said Kedzuel.

The Great Western Dragon in human form wagged his head.

"So long as one piece of him stays here, he just reforms again in the Astral Plane. That is where I held up the bridge between himâ€"his Horrorsâ€"and Earth. There is something about that planet he's so interested in. What is it? Surely, your species has noticed he comes in waves when Mana rises."

"We've noticed," said Kedzuel. "Which is why my uncle took a particular interest in Erde-Tyrene when he approached it with the idea to give it Technomancy. When we decided to leave, we gave the humans what they needed to defend this galaxy withâ€"but it was also so that they could defend their world with as wellâ€"to stop the Reapers from returning."

Dunkelzahn leaned in closer to Kedzuel: "Tell meâ€"why does he come to Earth? What's so special about my home planet? Why does he want

it?"

Kedzuel's lips parted, attempting to take hold of a thought in order to answer, but as he was about to speak, the door opened again. There, two Sangheili warriors came in, dressed in gold armor.

"Ah, Cujo and Tulsa," said Telek. He stood up. "Your Highness, these are my other two Shipmasters, Cujo 'Mentatl and Tulsa 'Durosh."

Kedzuel stood to shake their hands. Then, Cujo and Tulsa sat down. Dunkelzahn smiled when he saw Cujo, his face greeting him like an old friend he had not seen in a while.

"Cujo!"

"Hey, Mr. President Dragon," said Cujo. "Behaving yourself for Telek?"

"He does not," said Telek. "Casper's hauntin' every bulkheadâ€"I think a few weeks ago he tried to pretend he was the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come a few times as well. Not the original Dickens versionâ€"the Bill Murray version with the CRT-monitor head. I think he had the indian chief test pattern up too and it was talkin' to me!"

"Creepy," said Cujo. "Now, why would you do that, Big D?"

"I thought it would make a cool Halloween costume," said Dunkelzahn. "Guess Telek didn't like it."

"It ain't Halloween yet, Casper," said Telek. "And besides, you're technically in costume wearin' that human skin of yours."

"I guess so," said Dunkelzahn.

Telek turned to the other two Shipmasters: "So, what's the report?"

Cujo wagged his head: "It's going to take some time to repair our ships, Telek. I don't think we've got the firepower against them right now. There is something on those ships they're using!"

"Reaper tech," said Telek. "Which is completely outlawed by the Council on Sanghelios."

Tulsa leaned over, holding his head in his black-gloved hands.

"I don't fucking believe this!" he said. "Reaper tech?" He looked back over at Telek, his yellowish-green eyes widening. "Are those idiots crazy? Do they have any idea what that stuff can do to them if they remained exposed too long?"

"From what the Arbiter told me," began Kedzuel. "This Jul 'Mdama and his little band don't believe a word about the Reapers." He leaned to Telek. "Kiryuu told me New Llanelli was a base for Cerberus as well, but they abandoned it when the Covenant glassed the planet."

"It was," said Telek. "This was back when Cerberus was in fact a covert operation within the Office of Naval Intelligenceâ€"and when

those jokers were taken their orders from President Kiryuu Knight and not the Illusive Man. Let's just say when they lost their funding after the war was over, none of them wanted to give up their special talentsâ€”which is why the Illusive Man is their boss now. He funds them. Where he gets that funding, I don't know. Not even Kiryuu knows and he usually is the one who knows everything and everyone. He even knows what your shit smelled like the night beforeâ€”and what you ate because of it. Nothing gets passed Kiryuu Knight. Some how, this joker has."

"Knight's loosing his touch," said Cujo. "People aren't scared of him like they used to be. At least humans aren't. The Citadel races, that's a whole new story. They absolutely hate himâ€”especially when they all found out he was involved with the SPARTAN Project and helped Halsey kidnap 6-year olds to be turned into cyborg soldiers. They all think it's an AI trying to turn humanity all into machines too."

"And from what I got from Malcho, both he and Kiryuu were blackmailed into the project," said Kedzuel. "I'm more inclined to believe Malcho than those assholes at the Citadel."

Telek sighed: "I never agreed to that project when I discovered what it was, but I met one of the best human beings because of itâ€”John-117. If you ever run into him, Your Highness, shake his hand. You'll be grateful for doin' it. I know I did when I finally won his trust."

Kedzuel nodded: "I'll be sure to do that." He looked to Cujo and Tulsa. "As for the Reaper tech, this is why I wanted to rush out here as fast as I could. I want to know how they got the Reaper tech and where they got it from."

"I think we can do something about that," said Telek. "With our ships out of commission right now, we ain't goin' anywhere."

Kedzuel chuckled, placing a claw upon Telek's shoulder.

"That's alright, you can all bunk with me," he said. "While my crew are helping to repair your ships, we all can go down there and find out for ourselves what the deal is with New Llanelli. Maybe we can find some proof down there that will finally put 'Mdama and his friends behind bars and this war over with."

Telek nodded, rising from his chair: "I like the sound of that! Alright, looks like we've got a plan now."

Kedzuel smiled, seeing the sparkle in Telek's blue eyes. Megellan's glowing cyan eyes suddenly became distant as a message was sent to him from the infirmary. Then, his eyes blinked and he looked back at Kedzuel.

"Um, Tom Jimenez," he began. "The head surgeon says he's coming around now."

"That's good!" said Telek. "Can I see him?"

"Yeah," said Kedzuel. He stood up and held out his coppery golden claw. "I'll take you to him. Megellan, stay with our guests. You know them much better than I."

"Sure, Kedz," said Megellan.

Dunkelzahn turned back to Megellan: "You can tell me why Earth is so important to King Ghidorah, Commissioner."

Megellan dipped his head, swallowing hard: "I'll try my best."

Telek and Kedzuel backed up and the Blitzardi took hold of the Sangheili's shoulder again.

"This might tingle a bit," he said.

"Alright," said Telek. Then, his vision was filled with a great, blinding, flash of white light. As it cleared, his perspective changed. He found himself standing in the middle of a massive, coppery-golden palm and fingers tipped with onyx colored claws. Telek's eyes widened when he looked up to find Kedzuel now in his true size—a towering giant of over 250 feet in height.

"The hell?" he said.

"Sorry about that," said Kedzuel, his voice a great thunderous boom now to the tiny alien in his palm. "When we got Tom out of his ship, we didn't have much time to make the proper adjustments to his size, and we did not want to injure him any more than he was. So, we left him in his true size." The Blitzardi turned and smiled. "I'm sure he would rather see a familiar face that's close to his size as well."

"I guess," said Telek. "So, this is how big you are?"

"Yes," said Kedzuel. "Surprised?"

"A little, but I've been around Kiryuu Knight in his true size," said Telek. "I have to admit, you're taller than he is. But my ship's still bigger than you."

"And my ship's bigger than yours."

Telek crossed his arms and let loose a good, hearty, belly jiggling laugh: "I guess it is! You win, Your Highness."

Kedzuel turned and slowly lowered him upon a slab of strange black, granite-like platform. As Telek stepped upon the platform, ripples formed out from under his feet as if he was walking on water—"water" that was both solid and liquid. There, he found Tom Jimenez lying upon a long, draping silvery cloth. Looming over the human was an enormous Lengodo Kethos, dressed in muted colors much like Erin wears. Telek guessed this was Kedzuel's head medical officer. Filaments of glowing cyan flowed around Tom's body, streaming out from the neck of the Lengodo. Though, he also noticed that Tom was also Connected, his cords were out, the markings along his cheeks were there. Telek ran to him, kneeling down beside the human.

"Tom!" he called. "Disconnect, you idiot!"

"It's alright," began the Lengodo. "I forced a Connection to help him heal. It is perfectly normal."

Telek turned to look up at the green Precursor, breathing heavily. Then he turned back at the towering Emperor beside the Lengodo.

"I'm sorry, but Connecting kinda hurts the little fella," said Telek. "His brain was hemorrhaging."

"I know," said the medic.

"It has to do with we not teaching them all our tricks," said Kedzuel. "Including the ability to stay permanently connected to the Array without any ill effects. He tried to download too much of Takhisis' power all at once in order to save you."

"Who's power?"

"The Array," said Kedzuel. "And we'll leave it like that."

Telek sighed, wagging his head: "Look, I don't care whatever it is—what the Array is—or what it does. I just worry when it hurts members of my crew like that when they use it."

"Skipper?" moaned a soft voice. Telek looked down to see Tom opening his eyes up, they were glowing cyan like the Precursors'.

"Tom!"

"I'm—alright," he said. "Told you he'd make it."

"I know," said Telek. "You saved all our hides back there. I couldn't ask for more than that. You did well, son."

"Thanks, Skipper," said Tom.

"Sure. Just get some rest. We'll be outta the woods in no time."

"A couple of hours should do it," said the Lengodo. She turned to Kedzuel. "To reduce the swelling to his brain."

"Sounds about right," said Kedzuel. "I'll leave it in your hands, Doctor." He held his claw out to Telek again. "Admiral, come on. Captain Jimenez needs his rest."

Telek rose up, giving Tom a positive thumbs up.

"Thanks, Skipper," said Tom, giving him the thumbs up back.

Telek turned to the Lengodo: "You take care of him, ya hear?"

"Of course, sir."

Kedzuel held his claw out to the Sangheili and Telek hopped back in. As they left the infirmary, Kedzuel snapped his fingers and the Sangheili disappeared out of his claw. Suddenly, he reappeared again, this time just only a head shorter than the Emperor himself. Telek gasped, feeling his sides.

"The fuck was that?" he asked.

"I need your help with something, Telek," began Kedzuel. "When this

ship drops slipspace, I need your help to guide her to New Llanelli."

He motioned for the Sangheili to follow him down the corridor. They passed through walls, rippling in between the spaces until they arrived into a large chamber of the same granite-like substance.

"Where the hell are we?"

"The ship's bridge," said Kedzuel. "Here, I fold space." The cyan cords flowed out, latching upon the walls around him. Telek looked around as the walls themselves seemed to disappear, folding away panel by panel to reveal the blackness that was slipspace. Kedzuel motioned and soon everything was filled with stars. "There we are. Out of slipspace." He turned back to Telek. "In order to fold space, I have to see a clear path."

"Where are we?" Telek asked.

"Middle of nowhere," said Kedzuel. "As to what distance we are to New Llanelli, I don't know. That's where you come in."

"Alright."

"I don't use spacial coordinates to travel," began Kedzuel. "I use visual coordinates. You know what New Llanelli looks like"and because of that, you're the only one who can properly direct me in folding space to get to it."

"And how do I do that?" asked Telek.

"Connect with me."

"Oh no!" said Telek, waving his hands. "I'm not gonna end up like Tom!"

"You won't," said Kedzuel. "You'll be sharing my connection. I can take the brunt of it, but I have to see where I'm going to fold space. You know where it is, so I need that knowledge."

"Alright," said Telek, sighing as he scratched his head. "Let's do it" "I guess."

Kedzuel smiled and then two fibers of his cords floated on down around to the back of Telek's neck. Telek felt a horrible sting upon his neck as the cords inserted themselves into him. The Sangheili grunted. His eyes started glowing cyan, much like Kedzuel's. The Emperor's eyes widened when he realized just how easy it was for Telek to link up to his cords, his mind not even fighting against the Connection.

"You've done this before!" he said. "With your human Technomancers?"

"No," said Telek.

"Then, where?"

"Long story," said Telek. "Too long to tell right now. Maybe later."

So, how do we fold space?"

"Picture New Llanelli in your mind," said Kedzuel.

Telek closed his eyes and began to imagine the planet, a desert planet with a scar upon its face. It was a Covenant glyph that was burned upon the face, a circular glyph with a jagged line through it and two dots. It meant 'Heresy'. Kedzuel saw this planet in his mind as well as he drew the image from Telek.

"Now, I will bring that planet to us," said Kedzuel. He reached out with his claw and as if he was taking hold of the fabric of space itself, Telek saw the stars wrinkle up like a dinner cloth. The Blitzardi tugged hard upon the cloth that made up space-time and drew it close to him. Telek's eyes widened just as he saw a distant star draw close to him, and then a planet, the planet with that scar on its face. The movement was swift, sickeningly swift and the Sangheili felt his head swim from the motion. Within just a second, they were there, orbiting the planet. Telek fell to his knees, gasping for air just as the cords unhooked themselves from his neck.

"Now," began Kedzuel. "We go and discover what mystery this planet has."

"Give me a moment," said Telek. "I think I'm about to lose my lunch."

6. VI

****VI****

****_1220, September 10, 2560 (Military Time)\ New Lleneli\
_****Shi'lithra****

Kedzuel moved his ship down below the atmosphere, scanning for any sort of underground base.

"I'm surprised as large as your ships are," began Telek. "They didn't break apart coming so close to the planet."

"Non-phased ships this size can't get this close to the planet," said Kedzuel. "But a phased ship can dip below the gravity well of a planet and then drop out of phase with little harm."

"That's good," said Telek. "They can't see us, right?"

"Nope," replied Kedzuel. "They can't. Unless they have sensors that can detect a ship out of phase with reality."

The two paused as Telek detected movement at the corner of his eye upon the screen in front of them. For a few minutes, they stood still, silently watching the dusty, rusty ground. The two kept their eyes upon it, waiting just for something, anything to pop out of the rock formation the _Shi'lithra_ landed near.

Nothing moved, not even the pebbles in the wind.

Kedzuel and Telek looked to each other, their eyes wide, holding their breaths. Still nothing came. Kedzuel exhaled and combed his

fingers through his loose bangs. The Blitzardi rumbled a chuckle and crossed his arms. A blue screen flashed on and a vector of the landscape appeared with the strange curly language of the Blitzardi. They blinked red, hovering over a spot on a hill near a dried up riverbed.

"There we go," said Kedzuel.

"What's that?"

"Reaper tech," he replied. "Wait."

He pointed to the vector of a bulbous shape moving towards them on the screen. Through the walls, they could see the purple, bulbous shape of an aircraft hovering over. Telek and Kedzuel looked up, seeing one of the Covenant Remnant assault carriers hovering in the hazy blue sky above. Though they were inside Kedzul's ship, the two could see all around them in every direction as if no walls blocked their view. Kedzuel lowered the ship completely to the ground and the ship's bridge and only two occupants looked like they were standing in the riverbed itself.

"This looks weird," said Telek.

"Hang on," said Kedzuel.

"We can spy on them, walk around them," said Telek. "If only I could do this when I was fightin' Covenant. The active cammo we had wasn't perfect, certainly wasn't like this."

Kedzuel's finger flew across the blue screen, shifting holographic, angular shaped boxes and spheres around. From Telek's point of view, it looked like he was doing something important, but the Sangheili could not tell what it was.

"There's Forerunner tech down there too," said the Blitzardi.

"I'm not surprised," said Telek. "When we discovered New Llanelli during the war, we found it all because the luminari that is installed on all Covenant ships showed Forerunner technology under the surface. The Fleet Master responsible knew whatever artifacts that were underneath would not be harmed by the orbital bombardment. Rarely did the Covenant deploy troops. Most battles were fought above the planet."

"Deep space battles too?" Kedzuel asked.

"No," said Telek. "Always in a system, especially a planet 'we' wanted to glass. Or space stations the Covenant wanted to destroy. It got so bad that Admiral Cole from the UNSC ordered the Cole Protocol. If running into a Covenant ship ment blindly jumping into who knows where just to lead them astray from human worlds. Ship logs were often wiped clean to prevent the coordinates of Earth being discovered. Or they would destroy their ships. Anything to keep the Covenant away from the inner planets." He smiled. "When I defected from the Covenant, I would hijack Covenant ships, scrub them of any bugs and deliver them as a present to the UNSC to replace the ships they lost."

Kedzuel started to laugh: "So that's why _she_ called you a

pirate!"

"Uh-yeah," said Telek. "Who's she?"

"Oh, just a friend I met," replied Kedzuel.

"Well, yeah, they call me a pirate," said Telek. "Though sometimes I thought of myself as a Robin Hood of sorts...if you go by Earth literature. Steal from the technologically advanced and give to the technologically poor as it were."

Kedzuel chortled at the Sangheili's self description of his deeds.

"Kiryuu wanted me on his team," said Telek. "How could I refuse? I could finally kick Truth in his lying teeth. I discovered the truth of the Halos, and it destroyed my reality, so I revolted against the establishment. I made some good friends, and I lost some good friends. You never forget the day you lose those that matter the most to you."

"I know," said Kedzuel. "I lost many friends during the revolution against my uncle. You really don't no matter how long its been."

"Well, I helped a species that my own sectioned off for genocide," said Telek. "The humans called me a miracle worker. Luck was always on my side then. Now, in my silver years, I feel that luck is slowly running out."

"I wouldn't say that," said Kedzuel. "I found you. And I'm here to give you some fresh luck."

"I do appreciate that," said Telek.

They returned their attention to the Sangheili who jump from their phantoms upon the bank of the riverbed. They leaned down towards a small depression in the hill itself and removed a piece of rock. There, a holographic screen appeared before them and the leader of the group proceeded to input a group of codes into the pad. Once the door chimed approvingly, and a door hidden by the rock face slid open, the Sangheili warriors walked on through into the dark space inside. Telek felt disoriented as he watched his own kind now no larger than his toe shuffle themselves into the door from the transport.

"I am a giant among midgets," he said.

Telek got to his knees, watching as the Neru Pe Odossima filed on into the bunker underneath the hill. He lowered his head down, closing one eye as he peered into the tunnel the Sangheili went into. He could not help but to notice how they were dressed, their armor looked like a mish-mash of plating and harnesses from everywhere. He saw the shoulders from a zealot, the helm from a minor, the thorax armor from Special Operations, thighs from a Majors. The big Elite shook his head. Even he never devolved to such savagery, to wearing haphazard armor, mismatched, stained, painted with tacky markings of their faith on their blue armor. They did not look like warriors. Despite their misshapen armor, they still walked like warriors.

Then, the door closed and Telek got up from the ground.

"We need to see what's inside there," he said, turning back towards Kedzuel. "How do we do it? I'm used to sneaking in...but age...caught up with me. I'm not as nimble as I used to be, so I generally just send in Shri."

"I got something better," said Kedzuel. The Blitzardi raised his claw, holding it level. As he raised it, a meter was glowing underneath it. Kedzuel slowly lowered his hand down the meter and telek watched as they began to phase down through the bedrock. They lowered down through the levels carved under the rock. Telek leaned down again, but he found the size he had now a bit cumbersome.

"This ain't gonna work," he said. "We're too big. It's like tryin' to peek into the window of a doll house."

"Sorry about that," said Kedzuel. "My species is like one of ten who are this size. I know it isn't normal. Most sentient species are your size or a foot or two larger or smaller than you. Monsters, monsters are our size." He crossed his arms. "We were one of the lucky ones who didn't end up like the monsters of old. But there have been a few monsters among us."

"There's monsters among everyone," said Telek. "You don't need to be giant sized to be a monster. I learned that the hard way. Truth was definitely a monster."

"So very true," said Kedzuel. "Truth may have been your monster you had to slay, Khan was mine."

Telek leaned down again, trying to see what was going on down below.

"I can barely see anything," he said. "We have to get in there."

He leaned up ducking around the tunnels, his head fitted in.

"Can we?"

"We can," said Kedzuel. "Let's do it."

Telek turned back to one of the rooms where the Neru Pe Odossima was. He leaned up, his eyes focusing upon a holographic screen casting a cold blue hue upon the room and its occupants. He saw what looked like a human on the screen.

"Hang on," began Telek. "You got a recording device?"

"Yes," replied Kedzuel. "The only problem is...it is sound. So long as we are phased, there will not be any sound."

"Don't need it right now," said Telek. "Video is fine."

Kedzuel pressed a few blue keys upon his hard-light screen. A speck of light flew out of a silvery panel from the ceiling and floated just above Kedzuel. The Blitzardi guided the little light down towards the Elites who stood in front of the screen.

"I think I see Jul 'Mdamá there," said Telek. "He's that one with the blue armor, the white hand on his harness and the glowing stripe on his helm."

He looked up at the screen the probe projected upon the wall. Telek moved closer towards it, his crystal eyes widening when he saw the familiar golden, angular symbol on the left hand corner of the screen itself. Telek took in a deep breath.

"Cerberus!" he said in a chilled hiss. Telek turned to Kedzuel. "Before we act, we need to send this to Kiryuu. Jul's rubbin' elbows with Cerberus."

Kedzuel held up his hand, commanding the meter to raise the ship above the surface. His battle-chariot ascended into an orbit around the planet once more. He walked over to Telek as the probe flew over his shoulder. The two only looked at each other.

"On my ship?" Telek asked.

"Yes," said Kedzuel. "I can make the transmission." He took Telek's arm. "One, two, threeâ€¦"

Upon the Shadow of Darkness, the three Shipmasters, Kedzuel, and Dunkelzahn watched the probe playback the scene. Dunkelzahn shook his head.

"Cerberus," said Tulsa. "Why are these people working with them?"

"Look at how they're dressed," said Telek. "The beat up armorâ€¦"

"I've used the Shi's scanners on their ships," began Megellan. "Lots of coolant leaks. Patched fuel lines. They're small, but very noticeable. The only thing that are working are the new upgrades from King Ghidorah. They are using his energy to seek you out."

"Okay," began Cujo. "Where did they get it? How? And was it through Cerberus?"

"I don't seem to recall Cerberus being employed by King Ghidorah," said Tulsa.

"They aren't," said Telek. "It don't mean they can't use his shit for their means. And isn't that's what that space freak wants, us to use his stuff so we could be easier to control?"

"That's exactly what he wants," said Kedzuel. "King Ghidorah will not stop until we're calling upon him to brush our teeth. Absolute control." He wiped his mouth and fluffed his bangs. "It's no wonder why he...my uncle...fell to King Ghidorah's charms."

Telek sighed, nodding slowly. Deep down, he hated the fact that he fell to King Ghidorah twice in his life., the last one happening just two years ago. The three headed, golden dragon from another reality was becoming more and more up front, more visual with his actions.

"He was appearing everywhere, and his Reapers were not even in the

galaxy yet," said Telek.

"Trying to psyche everyone out, Excellency," said Tulsa.

"I'm inclined to agree with Telek," said Shri.

Cujo took his helmet off, plopping it onto the metallic, iridescent table with a loud clang.

"That's it," he said. "When I see Cerberus, Jul 'Mdama, and King Ghdiorah, I'm shoving plasma grenades down each of their throats. All the plasma grenades."

"Right there behind you," said Tulsa. "But replace the throats with the asses."

"Both ends," said Telek.

Kedzuel just chuckled and nodded with agreement. Telek shook his head with a disgruntled grunt.

"I want to know how the hell did they get the tech," he said.

"We need to go down there to see what sort of Reaper they've got," said Kedzuel. "If I am going to help you, we need some solid evidence that will convict Jul, and also convince my High Council that it is necessary that I be involved in this."

"Don't tell me, your High Council are a bunch of bureaucratic sticks in the mud too," said Telek.

"The biggest in the universe," said Kedzuel. "And the less I deal with them the better. Just give them what they want and I can get what I want quicker."

"Damn it," the big Sangheili sighed. "Well, I can provide you with that proof. We just need to go down there and infiltrate their facilities."

"No, I need to go down there," said Shri. "You have to stay up here. Doctor's orders."

Telek grunted disapprovingly, sneering and beating the table with his fist.

"I ain't an old man, Shri."

"You're old enough."

"Well, he's older," he said as he pointed at Kedzuel.

"Um, actually, if my life span was the same as yours," the Blitzardi began. "I'd be in my late 30s."

"Which is a good 30 years younger than Telek is," said Shri. "See, he's younger."

"He's got gray hair!"

Telek flipped a silvery lock in Kedzuel's auburn mane.

"The crown is a heavy burden," said Kedzuel, smoothing his bangs back.. "Has a habit of turning many emperors' hair white. Khan's hair was snow white before I lopped his head off. If his scales were pale enough, he'd look like an Auri."

"Sounds like the Presidency," said Dunkelzahn with a chuckle. "I'm surprised neither myself or Kiryuu didn't have white hair by the end of our terms."

Telek returned his gaze upon the Cerberus agent on the screen. The man had pale olive skin, black hair tied in a ponytail and black eyes.

"Alright, here's the plan," he said. "We're gonna call Kiryuu up and send this his way. Maybe he can identify who this agent is. Cujo, get Knight on the phone, pronto!"

"Aye, aye, Supreme Commander," said Cujo. He got up, walking towards a light, rosy hued panel and began to tap his gloved fingers upon the surface. The holographic screen appeared before him as the triangular glyphs of the Sangheili language flashed purple on black, informing Cujo that the call was going through. Then, within just a few seconds, a face appeared upon the screen. She was of the sub-race of the trolls, lovely tanned skin and striking violet eyes and full lips with a little collagen injections. Her horns were curved gracefully over her long, silky, heavy black hair. She almost looked like a supermodel.

"Utah Foundation of Bio-Organic Research, Tammy speaking, how can I help you?"

"Knight seems to have a new secretary every day," whispered Telek. "Trolls. I think he has an Orc assistant that serves him coffee, and an elf who at least does his nails."

Kedzuel chuckled: _"Well, at least he's got good taste in women. I like the horns on that one."_

"Uh, yeah," said Cujo. "I'm Shipmaster Cujo of Telek's fleet, I need to talk to Mr. Knight, is he in?"

"I am terribly sorry, sir," Tammy began. _"But Mr. Knight is out of the office, can I take a message?"_

"You've gotta be shittin' me!" Telek barked. "This is Kiryuu's direct line. Where the hell is he?"

"I apologize but Mr. Knight wishes not to be disturbed."

"Where the hell is he?" Telek asked.

"Private location, sir. He wishes not to be disturbed."

"Oh yeah?" Telek asked as he rose from his seat. "Do you know who he is?" He pointed his finger right at Kedzuel. "He's the fucking Emperor of the God Damned Known Universe! And when the Emperor of the Known Universe calls Kiryuu Knight, he better damn well answer the fucking phone, do you hear me?"

Kedzuel waved and grinned embarrassingly at the secretary. He rose from his seat and patted Telek's shoulder.

"It's okay," he said. "I can contact himâ€|"

"Do you know his phone number?" asked Telek.

"His phone number on the Array," said Kedzuel. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes. Telek began to chuckle and then grinned at the secretary.

"You're in deep shit now, sweetie," he told her. "The Emperor of the Known Universe is about to get your boss on the phone."

Kedzuel's eyes opened and he opened his arms up, revealing a cyan-colored screen and a flushed face of Kiryuu Knight upon that screen.

"Tammy!" Kiryuu barked. _"When Emperor Kedzuel Draconis calls, you forward his call to me!"_

"I'm...I'm sorry, Mr. Knight," she said._ "You told me to make sure no one disturbs you."_

"Admiral Telek 'Heros and Emperor Kedzuel Draconis are the ones who can, got that?"_

"Yes, sir."

"Good," he said. "What's going on, Your Highness?"

Just as Kiryuu asked the question, Kedzuel heard a familiar voice off to the side.

"Is that Emperor Kedzuel?"

"Yes, Liara, it is," said Kiryuu.

Kedzuel's smile broadened: "Is Liara there with you, Kiryuu?"

"She is assisting me with my little science experiment, yes," said Kiryuu. _"Do need me to pass a love note or something?"_

Telek coughed and cleared his throat, calling everyone's attention to him.

"I'm sure this is all very interesting, but I have something you should know about, Kiryuu," he said. "Cerberus is working with Jul 'Mdama. And they have Reaper tech on their ships."

"I know about the Reaper tech when Kedzuel left to find you," said Kiryuu, his face twisting into a cold, furious scowl. _"But what does this have to do with Cerberus?"_

"I'd figure you'd tell me that," said Telek. "Didn't you send me a memo informing about the Collector Base being destroyed and how pissed off the Illusive Man was when he heard about it."

"I do seem to recall that," said Kiryuu. _"That was the day I met Kedzuel as well when Malcho decided to blow me off."_

"I am so sorry about that," said Kedzuel.

Kiryuu rumbled dismissively, waving his paw. Telek snapped his fingers and pointed to the screen.

"Kiryuu," he said. "Do you know this guy?"

Kiryuu Knight turned his eyes towards the screen that showed the Cerberus face. The biomechanical dinosaur wagged his head and shrugged.

"No, I am not familiar with him," he said. _"Though I can see the Cerberus logo on his armor. Send this file to Ms. Tammy, Telek."_

"Right," said Telek.

It was then that Telek noticed exactly where Kiryuu happened to be. Behind the mecha was a gigantic skull inside a dimly lit warehouse. There were four draconic skulls lying behind Kiryuu Knight.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

Kedzuel leaned in as Kiryuu glanced behind his own shoulder.

"That is the remains of King Ghidorah, Telek," the biomecha replied. _"When he came to Earth for the second time after the London attack."_

"King Ghidorah's skeleton?" asked Telek. "What the hell are doing with King Ghidorah's skeleton?"

Kiryuu sighed and wagged his head: _"Because David Xanatos originally was supposed to dispose of them. I hired his company for that purpose. However, he did not. And instead, he experimented with them. Alan's last mission before he was frozen was dealing with Xanatos' illegal experimentation. I found that Xanatos is in fact linked in some way to Cerberus. Cerberus didn't exist back then, but I believe Xanatos' descendants had once controlled Cerberus before it came under the Illusive Man. It would explain why the Illusive Man is so interested in studying King Ghidorah. Because Xanatos' research is already in Cerberus' files and have been there since the late 21st Century."_

Telek sighed and pulled his helmet off, giving a rub to his head.

"Well, this got bad," he said.

"Makes me wonder," began Kedzuel. "Did this Xanatos become indoctrinated?"

"Yes," said Kiryuu. _"He did. You probably already know this, Kedzuel, but every piece of King Ghidorah can insure indoctrination. It doesn't have to be a Reaper, it can easily be the bones from the dragon as well."_

"Then, what the hell are you doing with them, Kiryuu?" asked Telek. "Get rid of them! King Ghidorah already tried to control me two years

ago. We've both been indoctrinated before, he could do it again!"

"I know," said Kiryuu. _"Which is why I've been trying to find a way to properly dispose of them. I can't just toss them out to sea, Telek." His eyes came to Kedzuel. "Which is what I'm hoping you could do for me, Your Highness. You need something of King Ghidorah to test your ship's weapons on. I have something I need to dispose."_

"I see," said Kedzuel. "Yes, that would be more than perfect to use, Kiryuu."

Then, Liara's head poked up from the screen.

"And I've been helping Kiryuu with the study," she said.

Kiryuu chuckled:_ "It's what I've needed her expertise with."_

"I have learned so much about King Ghidorah," she said. _"Beyond what even the Shadow Broker had."_

"I've kept a tight file on King Ghidorah," said Kiryuu. _"Mostly paper. Less likely to be snatched through the Extranet."_

"When you are ready," said Kedzuel. "I'll be there to blast that skeleton back where it came from."

"There's a base down there," began Telek. "And I've seen 'Mdama. Or what looked to be 'Mdama. He wore the same uniform that 'Mdama had."

"Are you sure it's him?" asked Kiryuu.

"We're gonna go down there to find out," said Telek.

"Do you plan on killing him?"

"No," said Telek. "Those religious yahoos will praise him as a martyr if I do. But if I drag him back to Sanghelios, have him tried and made the fool he is, it'll drive his popularity down. Incarcerate the bastard. And only then will we kill him...when he's dead to the world. Ain't nothin' worse to Sangheili than people forgettin' your name."

"Sounds like you've got a plan," said Kiryuu. _"Alright. Keep me posted. It's good to see you safe, Telek."_

"And here I thought you were happy to be rid of old Telek!"

"Now what gave you that idea?" Kiryuu asked with a grin and Telek chuckled.

Kiryuu looked away for a moment to something they could not hear, then he turned back to the screen.

"I should not keep you," he said. _"I may be out of contact for a while. I have to go and handle something very urgent."_

"What is it?" Kedzuel asked.

"I'm afraid in light of the Reapers returning, Chicago may be destabilizing," said Kiryuu. _"King Ghidorah is not just going to be relying on his Reapers to attack Earth. He may use the Invae as well."_

"Those giant bug creatures in Chicago?" asked Telek. "Cujo and Alan faced those things, right?"

"Yes," said Kiryuu. _"It was the first thing I sent Alan on when he was thawed into this century. I do not like leaving loose ends open. I have to make sure the barrier around Chicago will hold when the Reapers arrive."_

"Liara, are you going with him?" asked Kedzuel.

"Yes," she said. _"I figured it would be a learning experience to see Mr. Knight in action."_

"Someone of the Council race can finally see what it was I was originally built for," said Kiryuu.

"Bashin' the heads of giant monsters," said Telek with a chuckle. "Good luck!"

"And to you," said Kiryuu. _"Also, Telek, if you discover what it is these Sangheili are doing with Cerberus, my suggestion is to find Commander Shepard. She has ex-Cerberus operatives on board the Normandy. They maybe willing to give you intell about the Illusive Man's next move."_

"How do we find her?" asked Telek. "She's on the run right now."

"The same way Kedzuel found you," said Kiryuu. _"Those Cerberus operatives on board her ship are also Technomancers."_

Kedzuel smiled: "I can find them."

"Good luck," Kiryuu said as he clicked off.

The other screen with his secretary also clicked off.

"Megellan," began Kedzuel. "I've got the images of the hallways logged into the ship's teleporter. I need you to get to the Shi'lithra's bridge and monitor their movement. Also start setting up the planetary fence."

"What's that?" Dunkelzahn asked.

"An energy barrier we set up as a means of controlling planets that may be a danger to the Imperium," replied Kedzuel. "We basically put that planet on a time-out preventing anything coming or going from it."

"Time outs for planets?" asked Telek. "You ground planets like bad little children."

"Basically," said Kedzuel.

"Kedzuel," began Megellan. "I don't have access to the

fence."

Kedzuel huffed and raised a claw as a projected blue screen appeared underneath it. He pressed a sequence of keys and then the screen vanished. He gave a nod back to the Lengodo.

"Now, you do," he said. "I think you can drive my ship without my help, Mel."

"I can," he said, shrugging. "Just don't ask me to do tricks with this thing. It's too big!"

"Only because this was my uncle's ship," said Kedzuel. "He had to have room to house his fat ego."

"Shri," said Telek. "Start getting your Spec Ops ready, we're going down there to infiltrate the base." Then, he returned to Kedzuel. "We'll be invisible the entire time thoughâ€|"

"There's no need for that," said Kedzuel. "My replicators can create the armor to disguise you all in. And I'll be joining you."

"You can make us disguises?" asked Shri. "That's great! We can sneak in and access their files without being caught."

"Wait," said Telek. "You said that you're coming with us. No offense, but you don't look like a Sangheili, Kedzuel. We can pass for one of them, but you can't."

The Blitzardi chuckled as his body flashed and sparked. One final bright flash and as the light cleared, instead of a Blitzardi standing there, there was another Sangheili with glowing cyan eyes and three black triangular markings on his cheeks. He was dressed similar to the_ Neru Pe Odosima_.

"Now I look like I'll fit," he said.

"You're a shape shifter," said Telek. "Interesting."

"Blitzardi are the only ones of our species who can shapeshift," said Megellan. "And it is perfect as well. Meaning, it is undetectable, unless he is around other Blitzardi."

"Not bad," said Telek. "But even if the shape is undetectable, I highly doubt you've been studying the Sangheili language since you got here. So, you better let Shri and I do the talking."

"That's fine," said Kedzuel.

"Are you sure you wish to do this, Your Highness?" asked Shri.

"My ship is currently running on a skeleton crew," said Kedzuel. "And though while it is sailable, it is still not quite complete. I need them to remain on board. And I'm the only one that doesn't have some important job to do, so, why not me? I can handle myself. Don't worry. And I need some of the Reaper tech samples they have down there so we can discover what it is they are using it for."

"Alright, then," said Telek. "Let's go."

Â§Â§Â§

They slowly began to walk through the long, dark corridors of the _Neru Pe Odosima's_ base. A few times, they passed guards whom Telek greeted properly. They were all dressed in the haphazard, beat up armor these fanatical Sangheili wore. Kedzuel held to a carbine rifle in his hands keeping silent and following behind Shri and Ysoa. The paused for a moment when they came to the inner chambers where Telek spied them communicating with the Cerberus agent. The tri-valve door opened up with a chime and slowly Telek and his team slid in.

"Ysoa," said Shri. "Joss, keep watch of the door."

"Yes, Excellency," said Ysoa. He lifted his chin in silent command of the other Spec Ops and the two guarded the door.

"Alright," said Telek. "Let's see what this thing has."

He pressed his fingers across the holographic panel, shifting through the triangular lettering of the Sangheili language. Kedzuel looked up, not making hair nor tails of the language itself.

"Let's see what Jul's been hiding," he said. The screen flashed read and Telek grunted. "Password protected."

"Of course it is," said Shri. "What did you expect? Move over, I'll see if I can crack it."

"Well, excuse me, Princess," said Telek.

Shri 'Canthon began to shift through the panels, pulling up the login screen one more time. She pulled a device from a pouch in her armor and held it up to the computer. On the screen, Sangheili numerals began to flash, cycling through. The screen flashed green and several other screens zoomed on as the computer accepted the password. Shri placed the device away and tapped her fingers around the console.

"Here we go," she said. "Telek, I need that drive so we can start transferring this data over."

Telek pulled a purple hued, oblong device from a pouch and handed it to Shri. She stuck it into a port and began to download the information.

"It says here," she began. "That the _Neru Pe Odosima_ were contacted by Cerberus the moment they got wind of its creation. Cerberus was more than willing to give them technology they needed in order to repair ships."

"Does it give a location as to where they are getting it from?" asked Telek.

"No," said Shri. "Nothing. Cerberus must meet them somewhere and they probably have that logged on their ships."

"Shri, Telek," hissed Ysoa. "Someone's coming."

Telek turned around to find what he thought was Jul 'Mdama coming in with a group of Sangheili. Their weapons were out.

"What's going on here?" the leader in Sangheili. "Who are any of you?"

"Uh, we're the night janitors," replied Telek. "Just making sure the place is clean."

The leader growled and walked towards Kedzuel.

"Is this true?" he asked the disguised Emperor. Kedzuel could not answer. Instead, he looked rather confused to the Sangheili, not understanding what he just asked. The Sangheili barked. "Well, can't you speak? Do you understand what I'm saying, warrior?"

Kedzuel swallowed and then replied in his own language: _"Sey f'dor mo?"_

Telek growled, leaning his head into his hands.

"What did he say?" the leader asked. "What language is that?"

"Excellency," began one of his guards. "That warrior is an imposter. They're all imposters!"

The leader took out his sword emitter and the plasma sword turned on with a clash. Telek brought his out as well and his modified Technomantic pistol.

"Telek 'Heros!" the leader called, recognizing the pistol. "I should have known!"

Shri pulled her sword out as well and Ysoa and Joss began to fire from behind. Kedzuel backed up trying to figure out just how the Sangheili carbine rifle worked.

"How do you fire this thing?" he asked in English.

"You've got to be kidding me," said Telek as he fired off a round from his pistol. "Use the trigger."

"Where's the trigger, this gun has four different finger grips!"

A Sangheili warrior leapt upon Kedzuel, knocking the disguised Blitzardi down with a roar. He ignited one of the plasma daggers from the cuff of his bracer, pointed it right between Kedzuel's eyes.

"Die, imposter," he said. Before the Sangheili could strike his dagger straight through the disguised Blitzardi's forehead, he gurgled and then fell over, twitching violently. Kedzuel pushed him off and raised his now ignited Technomantic energy sword.

"No thank you," Kedzuel grinned. He looked around to see Telek clashing swords with the leader, the one who Telek thought was Jul 'Mdama. Telek roundhouse kicked his opponent into a stack of boxes.

Telek slid in a Medusa shell and pointed right at the commanding Sangheili. He rose up from the boxes, shaking off the toss and growling deeply.

"You will pay for that, heretic," he said.

"I hated being called heretic back during the Covenant War, and I don't like being called one now," said Telek as a charge of purple white sparked up upon the end of the barrel of the gun. Before the Sangheili could even dodge, Telek fired the shell upon him. The Sangheili instantly froze in place, purple-white streaks of nimbus charged energy flowed up and down his body. Kedzuel sniffed, blinking with some amazement at what Telek had done.

"A caster gun," he said. "I haven't seen one of those in a long while. Not bad at all, Telek. Now, here's my version." Kedzuel raised his hands as his disguise faded away, revealing his true form. Purple-white ribbons of electricity lept out from his talons, striking the enemy Sangheili. The bolts lept from one Sangheili to another until all of them were now frozen solid. "There we go."

Shri, Ysoa, and Shri's other Spec Ops Sangheili stepped away, lowering their weapons. Telek walked over to the leader Sangheili and knocked his helmet off. He stepped back, his blue eyes wide.

"You ain't Jul 'Mdama!" he said.

"What?" Shri asked. She came around and wagged her head. "It's not him."

Kedzuel walked over and then touched the frozen Sangheili commander's forehead, freeing it up.

"Alright," said Telek. "Where's Jul 'Mdama?"

"You think that I would ever tell a heretic like you?" he asked. "Jul 'Mdama walks among us all. He guides us now in place of the Prophets. He is the new voice for the gods!"

"The Forerunners ain't gods, you idiot," said Telek. "They stole the technology they had from these guys." He pointed at Kedzuel. "The Forerunners are thieves, not gods."

"This is the the lie a heretic like you would say, Telek 'Heros," he said.

"Where's Jul 'Mdama?" Telek ordered again. "Tell me!"

The Sangheili laughed, spreading his mandibles wide. Then, he barked out his language and the computer console responded. It flashed on the screen a series of codes and then numerals counting down. Telek heard the numbers sounding in his language, understanding with horrid realization what was about to happen. Kedzuel, however, still was a little lost.

"The base has been set on self destruct!" said Shri.

"Kedzuel," called Megellan through the commlink. _"The Sangheili ships are creating slipspace ruptures. They're trying to

escape."_

"Does that fence stop slipspace ruptures?" asked Telek.

"Yes," said Kedzuel. "But it does make ships explode when they try to get beyond it."

"We will all become martyrs!" said the leader. "We will die gloriously taking our enemies with us! For the glory of our gods!"

Telek's eyes widened and he turned back to Kedzuel.

"Get us the fuck outta here!"

Â§Â§Â§

Below the _Shi'lithra_ the glimmering brilliance of the ships and the base exploding expanded out in a bright, white, spherical swell of heat, fire, and energy. Megellan watched on, waiting with bated breath, silently sending a message to You Know Who in hoping that they all made it back to the ship before the fireball caught them. As the fireball faded away, all that remained of the location of the base was a gigantic crater. His ears twitched and he looked up, hearing a soft chime.

"We're on board," said the sound of Kedzuel's voice through the speakers.

Megellan finally released his breath in a sigh of relief. His shoulders relaxed and he smiled.

"And we've got guests!"

"Wait, what?" Megellan asked.

"Get to the brig, Mel."

He swiftly rushed out of the bridge and through the barrier that held the internal pocket dimension within the ship. Megellan swiftly ran through the courtyard, following the wooden walkway down a large, grassy, flowering hill that the great Imperial Palace sat upon. Blitzardi guards stood at attention turning to allow the Lengodo passage. Down into the lower caverns of the palace, he finally came to the brig where he found Kedzuel standing there with Telek 'Heros. Telek was at his regular size, no larger than Kedzuel's toenail. Beyond the energy barrier that separated them from the cell, Megellan spied several Sangheili encased in smaller, energy cubes that kept them separated from each other. Megellan placed his emerald claw upon Kedzuel's shoulder.

"Thank goodness you're safe," he said. "Zhane would flay me if you got hurt."

"I'm fine," said Kedzuel.

"Why do we have Sangheili prisoners?" asked Megellan.

"Telek came up with the brilliant idea to teach these Sangheili a lesson," said Kedzuel. "By letting them be prisoners of

giants."

"Oh."

"Now, tell me one more time," began Telek. "Or I'll get the big one to step on ya. Where's Jul 'Mdama?"

"I will not speak to a heretic," said the leader. "Nor his monstrous demon minions."

"Demon minions?" asked Kedzuel. "Hey, I'm not a demon or a minion. You're on my ship, buddy!"

"Where is 'Mdama?!" Telek roared. "Tell me!"

"Kill me then," said the leader. "For I will never tell. I shall die with the secret still held upon my tongue and you none the wiser, Telek."

"Telek, he's not wanting to cooperate," said Kedzuel. "Besides, perhaps simmering in a cell surrounded by guards that can easily step on them might make one of them talk later. And we do have the leads Kiryuu gave us."

Telek sighed as Kedzuel leaned down, laying his hand flat to the ground. The Sangheili climbed into the palm and looked back the prisoners as the Blitzardi slowly stood. They left the prisoners, walking up the wooden walkway towards the palace.

"Are you sure you can find Commander Shepard's ship," asked Telek.

"If they have Technomancers on it, I can," said Kedzuel.

"Good enough for me."

7. VII

****VII****

1410, September 10, 2560 (Military Time)\ Undisclosed Location\Normandy****

It was quiet for the most part on the Normandy. Joker sat at the controls, listening to the calming, and soothing music that were the ship's engine hum. EDI observed him with silent respect. Joker's eyes scanned across the orange screens, his eyes reading the heartbeat of the ship from the many gauges and meters in front. What would be considered another language for most, was a symphony to Joker. Amid the orange and golden glow of the screens, a single diode began to tick away with unusual readings.

"Joker," began the smooth voice of EDI. "I am picking up a disturbance."

"Where is it?" Joker asked as he leaned in to study the metric.

"Everywhere," she replied. "Electromagnetic, but...I do not read a

ship near by. I...I cannot explain it, but something just...seems off."

Joker flipped his hat off his head to give his stubbly hair a good rub with his hand. Then he leaned against the leather cushion of his chair, crossing his arms. He stared at the screens, seeing the oscillator vibrate with almost a sense of confusion. At least from what Joker could read of it.

The black, starless void the _Normandy _traveled in was suddenly filled with a rosy hued sky and a sun peeking out from behind a group of mountains. The whole ship seemed to be heading for the sun, but not once had it moved position. Joker's eyes bulged out of his head when scene changed all around him. He saw what looked to be four Sangheili ships parked in the middle of a grassy plain.

"Joker, I believe the large carrier in the middle," began EDI. "That ship is Admiral 'Heros' ship. The _Shadow of Darkness_."

They passed another group of four Sangheili ships.

"Does Telek have another ship?" Joker asked.

"No," said EDI. "Joker, we are inside a closed universe. The landscape is looping."

"Like one of those old cartoons from five hundred years ago!" said Joker.

He could feel the _Normandy _come to a slow despite the push from the thrusters. Something from the outside was stopping the ship.

"Someone's got us," said Joker. "Shutting the thrusters off."

"Joker!" a commanding call came behind him, startling him so much he nearly leapt from his chair despite his brittle bones.

"Commander!" Joker said as Kaelyn Shepard walked up behind him.

"What just happened?" she asked. "Where are we?"

"I have no idea," said Joker. "Wonderland? I think we just passed through the mirror."

"If this is true," began EDI. "I am not going to the Mad Hatter's tea party, Commander."

"I do believe I've read something about that story from your culture, Shepard," said Garrus Vakarian as he walked up behind her. "And the proper comment in this situation is perhaps we fell down the rabbit hole. While we were on the run from the authorities."

"I believe the authorities just caught up with us, Shepard," said Miranda. "I am...getting a reading from the Array. An..._she _told me not to panic. Though, I must admit, this is giving me more reason to do so."

"Same here," said Jake as he walked up behind Miranda, leaning over her shoulder. "Something very...odd is going on here."

Shepard turned back to Joker, leaning over the back of his chair.

"Where are we?"

"I...I...dunno, Commander," Joker replied, wagging his head. "But it looks pretty. You know, we haven't seen a field of grass, let alone, anything natural like this...in a long while. If I could, I would just go out and run around in it."

"Why would a field make wish to run around in it?" EDI asked.

"Because it's big, open," said Joker. "I guess there's a little country boy in me. I think I have some sort of ancestor, somewhere, that my have been a farmer."

"It may look innocent, Joker," began Garrus. "But that's what makes it more suspicious."

"I'm with Garrus on that," said Shepard. "EDI, keep the scanners up, I want to know who it is we are dealing with."

Joker turned to the Commander: "Ma'am, um, since that is Telek's ship, maybe we should...contact himâ€|since we're obviously...busted."

There was a deep sigh from everyone, their heads bowed. Kaelyn Shepherd crossed her arms, her eyes darting from each of her crew and then back to the four Sangheili ships.

"Commander, that ship really is the _Shadow of Darkness_, " said EDI. "And there is the _Divine Journey_, _the _Silent Wrath_, _and the _Righteous Fury_."

"We are so busted," said Joker. "We'll all be sitting in Telek's brig, he'll ground our ship for sure. Man, I hate food nipples."

"Telek hasn't had food nipples on his ship since his time with the Covenant," Shepherd corrected shortly. "From what I heard, it was one of the reasons why he defected."

"Bad tasting Covie food," said Jacob with a slight chuckle.

"The other reason, I believe, was because the leader of the Covenant was a genocidal and suicidal maniac," said Garrus. "Supreme Commander 'Heros is one of the few Sangheili who seems to have a tight head on his shoulder, and who isn't a religious fanatic."

"Joker, contact the _Shadow of Darkness_, " began Shepard. "Tell Admiral 'Heros that I surrender the command of the _Normandy _to him, and I will give my self up to the custody of the UNSC." She returned her somber gaze upon Miranda and Jake. "I am sorry, I couldn't get you all to safety in time."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," said Jacob.

"It's alright, Commander," said Miranda. "You did your best."

Joker pulled up a communication line: "_Shadow of Darkness, _this is the _Normandyâ€|"_"

Static was all that replied over the speakers.

"_Shadow of Darkness_, this is the _Normandy,"_ said Joker.
"Respond." He lifted his fingers off the panel. "No response."

"There seems to be a field surrounding the _Normandy, _Commander," said EDI.

"We're trapped here," said Joker. "Wherever it is we are."

"You are inside my battle-chariot, the _Shi'lithra_, Mr. Moreau," replied a deep voice from behind the group. "Within a pocket dimension I am currently maintaining within the ship itself."

The group spun around to find a tall, nearly ten foot tall, bipedal creature with broad crimson membrane wings and great, golden, curved horns. The creature looked to be a strange cross between an Eastern Dragon and a wolf, with coppery golden scales and glowing cyan eyes. The eyes were what drew Miranda and Jake's attention the most, and the fact he had three triangular markings upon his cheeks and the obvious glowing, sparkling, cyan bundle of threads draping from under his dark brown and auburn, long hair of his head to the floor. He was dressed in fine silk robes layered upon layered and colored in crimson, royal blue, deep violet and gold and decorated with golden leaves. A long, forked tail twitched just slightly behind him. He smiled friendly, as friendly as a mouth filled with sharp teeth could.

"Hello," said the creature. "I am Emperor Xi Kedzuel Draconis I."

For a long moment, there was an awkward silence. An idle cough came from Joker who swung his chair around to look upon the uninvited guest.

"I did not even detect him boarding the _Normandy," _said EDI, her voice held a slight touch of awe, if not complete startlement. "He was not there, and then, he was."

The silence was suddenly broken by the sound of a gun cocking behind Kedzuel's back. He felt a gun barrel press up against him.

"Don't move,_ bosh'tet," _said a voice lightly flavored with an electronic, scratchy sound. Kedzuel held up his hands and turned to see a slender, humanoid form dressed in a black environmental suit. She wore a helmet with a purple faceplate that obscured her face. Though through the mask, he could see two faintly glowing white eyes. The helmet of this creature was decorated with a violet, embroidered hood of swirling designs and matching leggings. Kedzuel beheld his first encounter with a Quarian.

"Tali," said Commander Shepard with a. "No!"

"Holding up a gun to the back of the guy everyone's started calling the Ruler of the Known Universe" began Joker. "Bad idea."

"Well, this is a fine welcome," said Kedzuel. "Though, I'd step away from my tail, Ms. Vas Normandy." His tail curled up towards her helmet, the twin prongs sparking with a flash of electricity. "You wouldn't want to get electrocuted."

The two, faintly glowing eyes inside the purple helmet widened as the two prongs pointed directly at the Quarian.

"Tali!" said Shepard. "Lower the gun!"

Tali took in a deep breath and bowed her head as she dropped the gun: "Yes, Commander."

"Forget the authorities," he said. "We've been busted by the Emperor himself. My only request for my last meal, sir, is to have a giant, juicy steak burger, dipped in heavy oil, and fat steak fries and pepper everywhere." Joker slowly rose from his seat. "Um, how are...criminals executed among you Precursors?"

Kedzuel smirked as a glowing ball of cyan light gathered in his paw. He squeezed it tight and his energy sword was ignited. The Blitzardi raised it up and then said softly: "Beheading."

Joker swallowed, his adam's apple bobbed in his throat.

"I am the one who does it," Kedzuel continued. "Judge, jury, and executioner." Then, he let the sword go and it vanished from his hand. "But not today. For now I have no acting authority over any of you. So, your fates are not in my hands." He turned to Tali'Zorah and bent down lower to meet her eye to eye. "However, if the commander of my Honor Guards...Zhane had not deemed that weapon of yours to be harmless to my kind, your head would surely have rolled today." He leaned back up. "After all, you are a guest upon my ship, your ship is on my ship. Not wise to shoot the acting commanding officer of the ship you are on. Isn't that considered a capital offense among your people?"

"I am sorry," said Tali. "Um...sir"ah..."

"It's 'Your Majesty', Tali," said Miranda. "He's a little bit more than just the captain of a ship or an admiral of a fleet. The ruler of many...many star systems. Whole galaxies..."

Kedzuel held up a hand to halter her: "From what I understand about the Migrant Fleet, admirals and captains are basically your version of royalty, Ms. Vas Normandy. 'Sir' will do fine."

Tali bobbed her head slightly, in some subtle gratitude that this creature she only heard about from the broadcasts sent by the Citadel was being at least somewhat politely dismissive to her incorrect address of him.

"The Ruler of the Known Universe, as many are either jokingly saying about you, or meaning it literally," began Shepard. "I, for the moment, cannot tell. But you certainly act the part, Your Majesty."

"I am a little more relaxed upon my...claim on your galaxy," Kedzuel said. "Given the fact we have not been here since the last Extinction Cycle. But if anything else, I am a good friend of Urdnot Wrex and Dr. Liara T'Soni. I don't suppose either have contacted you."

"You've met Wrex already?" asked Garrus, his brow ridges rising in surprise. "Where?"

"On Tuchanka," Kedzuel replied.

Shepard's rather serious and formal expression twitched as her mouth curled into a smirk.

"And why were you on Tuchanka?" she asked. "Did you get lost on your transport to find Earth?"

The Emperor gave a hearty laugh, giving his lengthy hair a shake and his wings a slight stretch.

"No, Captain Tyler was very gracious to give me a bit of a royal tour," he replied. "However, we only made it to Tuchanka before we had to make a pitstop in Ilium to help out Liara and her...personal problem. Though I had a particular honor in meeting Urdnot Wreave as well. And a special honor in breaking his face." Kedzuel curled his two fists and slammed them together with a thundering snap. "Apparently Wrex didn't mind."

"Why were you breaking Wreave's face?" asked Shepard. "That doesn't sound too...royal...of you. I can't picture an emperor going around the galaxy, beating up Krogan."

"I'm a warrior first, Commander," said Kedzuel. "Emperor second. Besides, Wreave apparently decided to show his disapproval when I told Wrex that I was here to help the people of this galaxy fight the Reapers. So, he challenged me and I accepted."

"Seems surprising," said Shepard. "Never thought Wreave could get his butt busted by someone other than Wrex."

Kedzuel's grin spread wider: "How could I refuse? The Krogan recognize strength, something many of my particular ethnic culture and race do appreciate as well. So, I showed him a sample of my strength. He didn't seem to question me afterwards."

"If only I was there to see Wreave get his tail handed to him," said Garrus as he walked over to the side. He held out his hand and Kedzuel shook it.

"Garrus Vakarian," said Kedzuel. "Once a C-Sec officer, but had more of an affinity for the vigilante sort...that I can really respect."

"Oh, were you a vigilante before you became Emperor of the Known Universe?" asked Garrus.

"I was," said Kedzuel. "I was a revolutionary, I fought for the rights and freedoms of the downtrodden, and when I got so fed up with the man in charge, I took his head, and then took his throne. Now I make the rules." He leaned a little closer to Garrus. "Sometimes, you

can't just fight for the people, you have to make the change itself...so that those you fight for no longer have to suffer."

"And then you met Liara after you left Tuchanka?" Shepard asked. "Why did you need to go to Ilium?"

"Actually, Liara called Alan for a favor," said Kedzuel. "I was...only along for the ride. She is doing fine, by the way. Ever since I've met her, she's asked so many questions about my species, our culture, technology, that sort of thing. Talked my ears off many times."

"Thanks for the update," said Shepard. "She can sometimes be a handful with her curiosity. But I'm glad Liara is doing much better since our last meeting."

Shepard cleared her throat as she slowly stepped closer to the Blitzardi. She crossed her arms again, and placing her weight mostly upon her right foot.

"I hope I'm not being too insulting to you, Your Majesty," she began. "But why exactly have you decided to kidnap my ship?"

"And how did you find us?" Miranda asked.

"Well, finding you was easy," said Kedzuel. "Especially when there were two Technomancers on board."

"What?" Jacob said. "We rarely even connected to the Array just so no other Technomancer would sense us. How did you do it?"

"Oh, my people have ways," said Kedzuel. "But for the manner in how I found you. I call it a light in the dark." He returned to Shepard. "Don't worry, I will not turn you in. But I am in desperate need of your help, Commander. And I hope that Ms. Lawson and Mr. Taylor no longer affiliate themselves with...a particular partyâ€|"

"Cerberus?" asked Miranda.

"We resigned the moment the Illusive Man decided to write all our obituaries," said Jacob.

"Good, they are now the only group of humans I wish not to associate myself with either," said Kedzuel. "Especially now that they have broken a very important law...of my peopleâ€|"

"And what law is that?" asked Shepard.

"Using Reaper technology without _my _authorization," replied the Blitzardi. "Or approval."

There was a hushed silence among the crew, everyone looking to each other, passing expressions of worry. Shepard lowered her hands and straightened her back. She nodded.

"You're right, we do need to talk," she said.

****VIII****

1445 september 10, 2560 (Military Time)\4 dimensional space\Normandy****

"This, this is amazing!" called Tali'Zorah as she looked upon the reddening sky through the windows of the Normandy's observation deck. "If only my people had this technology on their ships, to even have a world within each ship in the Flotilla...to have normal houses instead of stuffy, tight quarters, and grow food in gardens instead of hydroponic labs. To have the sun rise and set and mark each passing of each day like we would have done when we were on the homeworld...how can your people even do this?"

"As I started to say to Liara," began Kedzuel as he settled himself upon the chair. "Magic. I really cannot even go into how it is done. But, if there is a will, there is always a way. But that outside, it's not what my homeworld looks like. If it was, it would be all desert. One big...rusty desert."

She turned back to the Blitzardi: "Did your people destroy your planet's ecosystem because of war too?"

"No," replied Kedzuel. "It was because of progress. Here's a green-lesson for you, pollution is bad. My people ruined Kethoi to the point even most of the oceans dried up. Now all that's left is a bunch of salty, large lakes. Barely even called seas now. But we had a solution, we hollowed out the mantle, turned the planet into a gigantic dyson sphere...like the Shield Worlds the Forerunners built, and lived on the inside. And if you really want to be green with envy, Kethoi is mobile. It can even make spacial jumps. We didn't have the fuel to make the jump here, and right now, it's not the time for looking for a place to drop it in...so we've had to leave it behind to return here and help you."

"But you can take your homeworld with youâ€|" said Tali, her body frozen even at the thought of moving an entire planet from one place to another.

"Yes, we can," said Kedzuel. "Kethoi is my people's identity. It is the only identity we have left after we agreed to become the shield against the darkness. It is our memory of what we used to be before we became this."

"And what were you before you became our protectors?"

"Different," replied Kedzuel as he smiled remorsefully. "But that is all I can say about it."

"Tali," began Commander Shepard. "We really need to get to business."

"Right, sorry, Commander," said Tali. "I...just let my curiosity get the better of me. It is really fascinating. I even wonder if...I could see how the engines of your ship work, Your Majesty."

"I too would like to indulge in the mechanics of how your ship works, Your Majesty," EDI chimed in from the speakers above. "It is rather fascinating. I detect no computer controlling its functions. Not even

an artificial intelligence or a virtual intelligence."

"That I can easily answer," said Kedzuel. "My people never developed intelligent machines like yourself, EDI, or like Kiryuu Knight. My ship's internal and external systems are all commanded by my mind. The _Shi'lithra _is in fact an extension of myself, I am her only pilot and I require no other personnel to fly her. What crew she has is only there to maintainance her. The crystalline sentinels that guard this pocket universe are extensions of my honor guards' and their minds."

"Perhaps Joker can appreciate what you can do with that head of yours, Your Majesty," said Shepard. "I bet he wishes he could just make the _Normandy _an extension of himself."

"You damn straight, Commander," called Joker from the comm inside the ship. _"Then I could really make the _Normandy_ dance."_

"As for no computers on board, well, many of us are specifically trained and augmented to take over the computations computers would do for you," said Kedzuel. "The Array does help with some of that, but we do most of the work."

"But why don't you have computers?" asked Tali. "Even we Quarian know that computers are important. We just make sure they won't get too smart to think for their own now after our first mistake."

"There is one thing that computers can never do," said Kedzuel. "Factor in the 'organic' error. It is very hard for computers to understand it. I suppose that is why Kiryuu Knight is among the unique artificial intelligences that can factor in such paradoxes. His processors are organic in their nature."

"That must make your head hurt," said Garrus. "To perform so many functions without the aid of a computer."

"Sometimes it does," said Kedzuel. "Like when I had to dump sections of the ship to fit Telek's little fleet inside. Most times, it doesn't hurt. However, being a Technomancer does help alleviate some of the pain."

"I still would like to know how this ship of yours work, sir," said Tali.

"If there is time," said Kedzuel with a small smile. "But, time right now is not what I have." He lifted his head as two familiar people came walking in. "Ah, there you are."

Shepard turned around to find Supreme Commander Telek 'Heros standing there with another Precursor. This Precursor had dark green skin, black straight hair hanging down just below his shoulders, and wearing a science uniform and coat. Though, like Kedzuel, he had the cyan blue eyes and the cords dangling from the back of his head. Shepard came to her feet and saluted Telek.

"Admiral!" she said.

"At ease, Commander," said Telek. "Don't you worry now. I ain't seen ya. And I won't be tellin' no one where you been at either."

"Thank you, sir," said Shepard.

"Thank you, Mel," said Kedzuel. "For bringing the Supreme Commander." He directed his attention to the others. "This is Megellan J'rasai, he is Science Commissioner of the Imperium, what some people like to call top egg head of the egg heads."

"You may have not known this, Commander," began Megellan. "But I was the prisoner Captain Tyler found on one of the Halos discovered. For the last fifty thousand years or so, I've been in stasis, held captive by the one of the Forerunner custodians, a Monitor. It was only until Alan came that I was freed. I served on Alan's ship as...replacement engineer since he lost a member of his crew during the escape from Onyx. And I was the one who ended the Forerunner known as the Didact's life."

"Do tell Captain Tyler my condolences," said Shepard. "Believe me, I know what that feels like."

"Why were you a prisoner, Commissioner?" Garrus asked.

"On Charum Hakkor, the planet were the alliance between the People of Erde-Tyrene, I mean Earth, the San'Shyumm, and the Kethosi met," began Megellan. "The humans were working on a cure to the Flood virus the Forerunners created after dabbling too much with King Ghidorah's cells. Though my people were ordered to leave this galaxy for Andromeda, a few of us did return when we received the message from humanity of what they were working on. However, this happened after the Revolutionary War of Kethoi which Kedzuel won...and finally took the throne of the Tyrant Khan. It left us rather devastated, so we could not return in full force and aid the humans to defend their empire from the Forerunners; once the Didact got wind of what they were doing. We couldn't save humanity from its fate. But I agreed to return here to at least assist in completing the cure. Unfortunately, the Didact got to me and Lord Admiral Forthenchon before the scientists could piece the cure together. He took my old friend from me, locked me up in stasis. Unfortunately, even when I was battling the Didact, he could not tell me what he had done to Forthenchon or the others. I learned the truth of what happened to humanity. The once great empire of Erde-Tyrene, the one we chose to be our successors...reduced to primitive hunter-gatherer tribes." He turned to Miranda and Jacob. "Though our shared enemy took your minds, they could not take the Mantle of Protection from you."

"It is hard to believe that humanity had a space-faring society over fifty thousand years ago," said Garrus.

"It was far more advanced than it is today," said Kedzuel. "Completely different as well. Even the humans looked different. They were taller, more robust in their builds. And they had more pronounced canines than they do now. The Forerunners devolved humanity into twenty different subspecies. When a few Forerunners involved in this transgression died and their memories and knowledge added to the Array's catalog, we were able to study their notations and see just what they did to the new caretakers. I was especially furious when I discovered that the Didact had kidnapped my best friend. But we couldn't do anything. All any of us could do was watch and that was the worst punishment of all for leaving. I suppose Earth geological records stating this Torba volcano eruption was the probable cause of most of the subspecies dying out, only leaving the

ones the Librarian cataloged as the _Humanush _would later survive to become the Homo _sapiens_ of today."

Megallan then plucked a strand of his black hair from his head. He walked slowly towards Kaelyn Shepard and then handed it to her.

"What is this for?" she asked.

"It is a custom among the scientists of Kethoi," began Kedzuel. "Most importantly among Lengodo Kethosi. Knowledge can always be transferred through the code of life, what your people call DNA. Our code is a little different due to our particular chemical makeup."

"ZXO," said Megellan. "That is the Roman letter-abbreviation for our genetic code. It's name is very unpronounceable by many of your own species."

"This sample is a symbol of my species for the continual transference of knowledge between one another," said Kedzuel. "When knowledge is freely conveyed between two different peoples, there can never be any hostilities."

"I shall give this to Dr. Chakwas," said Shepard. "I know she would be very interested in studying it."

"Well, now we've all gotten to know each other," began Telek. "Time for the debriefing. Commander Shepard, my fleet, or what's left of it, and I...we decided to head for New Llanelli all because that was where the _Neru Pe Odosima _were headin'. Those of you who do not know, these are the religious nutcases who started the Sangheili Civil War and why we're havin' difficulties right now preparin' for when the Reapers come. All this fightin' and we could be using our energies to make sure King Ghidiorah don't bite us in the ass."

"The Sangheili fleets are crucial in the fight against the Reapers," said Shepard. "And thanks to you, they've been Earth's biggest supporters. Even when the Council turned its back on us, Earth could always count on the Sanghelios, thanks to you, Admiral."

"And their ships are gigantic," said Tali.

"And faster than anything seen in the galaxy," said Garrus. "You don't know how many Turians became jealous over Sangheili ships. I've heard it was one of the reasons why some Turians didn't want Earth among the Council aside the fact you all once had a leader who was an AI. It was because some of your ships were the captured Covenant ships from your previous war. Those same ships the Sangheili built. The Asari _Ascendant Justice _could fit inside your super carrier, Supreme Commander. And with room to spare."

"Well, I got my pride busted down when I discovered that my ship can in fact fit inside his ship," said Telek as he pointed to Kedzuel. "So, this ain't a matter of who's ship's bigger. And as for being one of the fastest. The _Shi'lithra _got everybody beat."

"I had no idea this was a contest," said Kedzuel with a slight chuckle. "Anyway, because the Sangheili are used to working on large ships, my people need some of their assistance. However, I can't have

it unless this civil war is over. And none of you can have their assistance unless it's been ended. I had my own qualms about going in and making the Sangheili Civil War my business where it shouldn't be, but, I discovered that these religious fanatics are using Reaper technology to augment their ships."

"Worse yet, they're rubbin' elbows with Cerberus," said Telek. "That's why we had to snatch you up from your little AWOL trip, Commander."

"That is a very good reason," said Shepard.

"Shepard, the Illusive Man was furious when you blew the Collector Base," began Miranda. "I don't know how he managed to get a hold of Reaper technology."

"Oh, there are other ways," said Kedzuel. "Many other ways. Sometimes, cleansing the galaxy of the Reapers isn't as thorough a job as you might think. There's always something left behind. It matters not how Cerberus got ahold of Reaper tech, what matters is why. This is a Cerberus built ship from what I have been informed of, and some of its crew were also Cerberus members, including Mr. Taylor and Ms. Lawson. Now that you have defected from that organization, perhaps you can inform me why they would give some of this technology to a fanatical cult?"

"You couldn't find out from your trip to New Llanelli?" asked Jacob.

"Kedzuel and I went down there personally once we discovered what was up," said Telek. "And the one I thought was Jul 'Mdama wasn't even there. Once they discovered us, they had that whole place scrubbed clean with a worm. Not even Kedzuel's technicians could recover the data."

"We first captured video, but no sound before we went in," said Kedzuel. "Then, we sent this information to Kiryuu Knight." His eyes returned to Shepard. "It was he who advised me to seek you out, Commander. I'm not asking that you come along on my little adventure, I can understand why you might be busy. But perhaps you and your friends might be able to point me in the right direction as to how I may be able to handle this."

"You said you captured at least some video," said Shepard. "Can you show us?"

Kedzuel turned to Megellan and dipped his head. The Lengodo stood up, placed one arm on top of the other, and then, pulled them apart. From this simple movement formed a blue-hued screen and a scene playing back on it.

"We could not capture sound because my ship was phased at the time," said Kedzuel.

"And sittin' between the bedrock and inside the base," said Telek.

"Your ship can phase through solid objects?" asked Garrus.

"Yes," said Kedzuel. "That was how I was able to bring you all inside

of her. It isn't really phasing as you might know of it, but going around a three dimensional object. It only appears like I am going through a three dimensional object. My ship moves in multiple dimensions. Currently, we are situated inside the fourth."

"So, that's the secret on how you were able to show up to the Citadel without anyone noticing," said Garrus. "Citadel Tower can't scan anything existing in a dimension they can't sense. They must've nearly wet their trousers when they saw your ship appearing out of nowhere."

"I did scare a few Turian ships passing by," said Kedzuel with a chuckle. "And a Salarian cargo freighter, from what I was told after I put the Citadel Council in their place."

"I wish I was there to see that too."

"Of course I had to make a lot of promises as well," said Kedzuel, flipping a long braid over his shoulder. "So I could at least get their blessing for mining on their planets for the minerals I need to finish the other ships, and to port in a small star gate to bring in the rest of my fleet. I've promised that everyone will have at their disposal the full might of the Imperial Fleet."

"At least I know I got one fleet on my side besides Earth," said Shepard. "And the Sangheili fleet too."

Telek nodded in agreement.

"That's good to know, though, Your Majesty," she continued. "I'm glad you're willing to help us out."

"Shepard," began Kedzuel. "It's why my people exist. We are the shield against the creatures from the Far Realm, including the Reapers."

Megellan filed through the probe's capture as they chatted, finding the correct images that Kedzuel wanted to show the _Normandy _crew and their commanding officer.

"I was one of the few who were against Khan's decision of leaving this galaxy," said Kedzuel. "For one thing, it is my home. I was born in this galaxy, as was my late wife, and my daughter. I believe at least the last five Emperors were all born here, even my crazy uncle Khan. This is my home, Andromeda is not. I've longed to return to it and I'm glad I finally got that chance. I just wish it was under better circumstances."

"Born in this galaxy," said Tali. "Wanting to return to your home. Now you know how my people feel. We've wanted to return to our home for the longest time."

"It ached even more," Kedzuel continued. "Whenever I hopped into my ship and all I could do was sit and look up at the big fuzzy splotch in the night sky, always looking, never being, never touching. But it's good to be home. When the war is over, we've all sent the Reapers back to their hellish reality, I think I might settle back here. Even if that means I have to yank Kethoi out of Andromeda myself."| "

"Over Serina's dead body," said Megellan, his gaze breaking away from the cyan-hued screen. "She won't let you move the planet without the High Council's say."

"Fine, then I'll go find another planet to live on," said Kedzuel. "One far away from that wrinkly old prune. Besides, I can always just teleport in whenever the Council needs my opinion on something, or whenever Serina feels like she needs to gloat about how wonderful she is and how horrible I am, or gripe about the Blitzardi secretary who accidentally knocked over her cup of _ghuchoe_ all over her desk. I think that's the reason why she hired Yu Quin Rae, so she could have a Blitzardi she could boss around and threaten to fire if the girl couldn't make her cup right every morning."

"And poor Quin isn't even a noble born Blitzardi," said Megellan. He turned to Commander Shepard. "Commoner Blitzardi weren't the usurping bastards like the nobility were. They were lucky to scrounge around for food and work like the rest of the slobs in the streets."

"Are you saying I'm a horrible person just because my father was a prince?" Kedzuel asked. "Pay Mel no mind, Commander. Not all Blitzardi are rotten, power hungry monsters like my uncle."

"No Emperor Farm Boy," said Megellan. "You worked the fields like every country peasant on Kethoi." Finally, he paused upon a image of the screen captured by the probe. "Ah, here we go." He flipped the holographic screen around. "Do any of you know who this is?"

Miranda Lawson stood, her eyes lighting brightly when she saw the face upon the screen. It was an image of a man with shoulder-length black hair. His ethnicity looked to be of Asian descent, with almond, black eyes, and olive skin. Her face melted into a sneer when she saw him.

"Kai Leng," she said. "I know him."

"Kai Leng?" Shepard asked. "Who is he?"

"One of the Illusive Man'sâ€¦ 'gopher boys'," the slender Technomancer replied. "Go for this, go for that. He is a top assassin, black ops, espionage, you name it, Leng has done it. Specialty is getting what the Illusive Man wants no matter who's life it cost to do so."

"Wonderful, a human Inlet/Outlet," said Kedzuel. "I should have known."

"What is an Inlet/Outlet?" Shepard asked, looking back at the Blitzardi.

"It's our word for political spies, government spies, assassins who also work like spies, Black-Ops," Kedzuel replied. "I like to call them information vampires. They soak up information and usually someone ends up dead because of it. I have the unfortunate position of housing one of these Inlet/Outlets who is keeping an eye on me for the High Council. Making sure I don't go blowing up planets on a whim."

"Kai Leng was originally an N7, ODST," said Miranda. "Until the Illusive Man got a hold of him. He was also one of those who

practiced Technomancy without authorization."

"Cerberus Technomancer," said Shepard. "This is getting better."

"Why didn't he stay with the ODST?" Kedzuel asked.

"Dishonorably discharged because he was charged with murder," replied Miranda. "He murdered a fellow marine while at a bar in Reach."

"And then the Illusive Man picked him up," said Jacob. "That sounds about right. I've heard of Kai Leng's military history, but I've never worked with him. And from what I heard, I never want to."

"Unfortunately, I've had the opportunity of working with Kai Leng personally," said Miranda. "He and myself have been one of the few who have seen the Illusive Man in person." She turned towards Shepard. Kai Leng was sent after Fist, Fist, who had information Cerberus needed on Saren."

"Back when Cerberus was...helpful" said Shepard as she called Kedzuel's attention. "And I use that term lightly."

"Leng was sent to recover Fist," said Miranda. "Or at least what he had on file about Saren. That is until you got to him first, Shepard."

"I have a habit of ruining everybody's party," said Shepard with a satisfied smirk upon her face.

"And Saren, the Turian Spectre, was the first to be indoctrinated by Sovereign," said Tali.

"He also had some of Sovereign's technology implanted into his own body," said Garrus. "He had this belief Sovereign was making him 'better'. But Shepard managed to talk him down and Saren killed himself when he realized the horror of the truth and what he had done."

"Except Sovereign managed to reanimate Saren's corpse and it started attacking us," said Shepard. "I took him out too."

Telek leaned back in his chair, wagging his head. Of course he knew this was not even close to being true. Saren was not one of the first to be indoctrinated. There were many that came before, including Telek himself and Kiryuu. The Sangheili was about to mention that, but decided to keep his mandibles tight on the subject, realizing that for now, it was best to keep such things away from the ex-Cerberus agents. Though Megellan could sense some of his thoughts on the matter and nodded with agreement. Telek passed him a similar glance as their eyes met.

"Ms. Lawson" began Kedzuel as he rose up from his chair. "Do you have an idea why Cerberus and the Illusive Man would give Reaper technology to Jul 'Mdama?"

"One thing that is a trait of the Illusive Man," began Miranda. "Is that he is very illusive." She rose up and held out her cream-colored hand. "And it's Miranda, Your Majesty."

Kedzuel took it and shook it firmly: "Thank you."

"Jacob, sir," said Jacob as he held out his thick hand to the Emperor. Kedzuel returned the gesture, giving it a firm shake as well.

"Kedzuel," said the Blitzardi.

"No one knows who the Illusive Man is," said Tali.

"No one knows his name," said Garrus. "And I believe Kiryuu Knight has been stumped by who and what the Illusive Man just so happens to be." The Turian turned his gaze upon Telek. "And from what I heard from you, Supreme Commander, that's been more trouble for the big cyborg dinosaur."

"What I've been gettin' from Kiryuu is that he and the Illusive Man are playing some huge game of chess," said Telek. "The only problem is, I think Kiryuu fears that he is losing the game."

"Finally an organic who can out think Mr. Knight?" Tali asked, her voice holding a note of interest. "That is a first."

"The Former President as never seen himself as infallible, Tali," said Shepard. "And you forget one thing about him. He's not entirely a synthetic either, he was alive, organic once. Even had a...mate...sons, daughters."

"Back when Kiryuu was nothing more than a confused animal in the wrong century," said Telek. "Never ended well for him. That's why he is what he is now."

"I...keep forgetting that part," said Tali as she bowed her head and folded her hands in her lap.

"Miranda, if you think you might have some idea as to why he's giving Jul Reaper tech," said Telek. "Is the Illusive Man backing Jul and his little cult?"

"As I said," said Miranda. "I can't give you a definite answer." Then she lifted a hand to chin and gave it a scratch in thought. "Though, I can perhaps give some suggestions. Cerberus, before it became fully controlled by the Illusive Man, was a section controlled by the Office of Naval Intelligence. Some of their notable references is during the Insurrection War. They would often times implant operatives who would pretend they were Insurrectionists, gain trust from the masses, while secretly subverting them. ONI used Cerberus agents to manipulate Insurrectionists and weakening their infrastructure."

Kedzuel turned around to look at Telek, who seemed lost as he listened to Miranda's stories of how Cerberus worked during the Insurrection War. His arms were crossed and his eyes unfocused.

"Telek," began the Blitzardi. "You said the Sangheili Civil War is weakening your people's might. It's why you wanted me to help you stop this, so you can come together to help us defeat the Reapers. Cerberus maybe trying to weaken the Sangheili by fueling this war and

providing technology that can give them an easy win."

Telek wagged his head and huffed with a snort of frustration.

"What I don't get is why," he said. "Why would they do this? We're supposed to be allies with the humans now."

"I know for a fact that some of humanity haven't really forgiven you guys for the little genocidal war you threw us in," said Jacob. "Despite the fact you...Admiral, decided to make friends with us."

"I suppose some old hatred are hard to get rid of," said Telek. "I've heard some of Jul's men call some of my own human crewmen 'nishum'. It means armored parasite, which is the very insulting word my people used to mean humans. The hatred still goes both ways." His head dropped as he removed his helmet. "Jul is more than willing to use anything to his advantage. He's a Zealot, as you maybe able to guess. Though from what I've seen of his religious propaganda vids, that old beat-up armor he wears doesn't make him look like one. Even if that means using technology he has no business in touching. Since Jul and his little cronies don't believe the Reapers are a threat, they're not afraid to dabble in their technology."

"Maybe we can use their ignorance to what it can do to our advantage," said Kedzuel. "My people were not against studying Reaper technology. After all, it was a part of the game...eliminating them. We had no choice but to study, experiment, however, there were heavy regulations."

"Not even Kethosi were immune to King Ghidorah's charms," said Megellan. "It was often advised that Lengodo handle most of the studying. It has to do with my race's natural psychokinetic abilities." He turned his head towards Kedzuel and then bobbed his head. "Lengodo natural abilities aren't as flashy as the Blitzardi, but they are still pretty damned powerful. I can tear through your mind and leave you babbling on the floor in a second. Or I can make you believe you're a fuzzy little bunny delivering chocolate eggs. And I was born with those powers."

"However, Megellan is half Blitzardi," said Kedzuel. "On his mother side. Even if he doesn't look it. Blitzardi are the only Kethosi who have sharp spines on their forearms. That's the only thing that makes Mel a little different than other Lengodo."

Megellan rolled up his sleeves to show the four black, sharp spines under his forearms.

"And he's a pretty good shot with his fulgurkenisis," said Kedzuel. "Though it's not as potent as a full-blooded Blitzardi. But if anyone needs someone's who's studied all sorts of electromagnetic frequencies and how to disrupt them, Mel is just as good as any Blitzardi, if not better."

"It's because I stop and think, use my powers at least scientifically," said Megellan. "Blitzardi have a habit of being a bit brutish. All muscle, and none of the brain."

"Hey!"

"Case in point," said Megellan, noting Kedzuel's retort. "Both his arms and his wing pectorals are over developed, but his brain case is quite small."

"Excuse me for not passing math in the academy," said Kedzuel. "Blitzardi math, one plus one, means my fist in your face."

Megellan chuckled: "Alright, I'll shut up now. But you did beg me to do all your homework while you went out and partied with the girls."

"You two sound like you're old friends," said Shepard.

"We met in Kethosi version of what you humans call middle school," said Megellan. "Well, because of my particular race's ability to block psychic attacks, especially with the best trained Lengodo having that ability, Lengodo scientists were essential for the study of Reaper technology. However, we couldn't block it for long. So minimum exposure was important. But there were often casualties dying for the greater good. I over saw many of these studies, and had the harder job of informing families of what they lost." He paused in his thought as if to remember some of the faces he had lost during such studies. "And the work was often ongoing. There was never any singular answer, just a pile of data stored, we learned more and more about them, but we lost just as much as we gained."

"Indoctrinated scientists," began Kedzuel. "Can never join the Array—give You Know Who the knowledge she needs to assist us in defeating King Ghidorah. Each time our scientists came close to an answer, that was when they were taken and whatever knowledge they gained from it was lost...returning to King Ghidorah rather than being shared through the Array."

"So we made habits in keeping hard copies," said Megellan. "We saved what we could on the Array, but when it got too far, and we knew it, we had to resort to paper copies, mineral slabs, data laced upon crystallized Black Lake cubes. Those were stored in what we called 'Sacred Records'. Not for any religious reasons, mind you, but they were very sacred because they held the key to knowing the Reapers weaknesses. Weaknesses we exploited over and over. But there was always a small problem."

"And what's that?" Shepard asked.

"There wasn't a true way to destroy Reapers once and for all," said Kedzuel. "We've spent five million years trying to figure one out...since King Ghidorah started to use the Reapers as a method of causing the Cycle of Extinction."

"It's because King Ghidorah cannot be killed by any means this reality can offer," said Megellan.

Kedzuel slowly walked over to the Commander as she rose from her chair.

"I hate to tell you Shepard, but if you're trying to find a way to destroy the Reapers once and for all," he began in a low, sadden voice. "You're going to need a lifetime even greater than ours to find one. The best we can do is destroy the Reapers King Ghidorah forms from harvested biomass. But it doesn't mean that will stop King

Ghidorah. He will always create more Reapers, a new batch. It takes him fifty to a hundred thousand years to form them. In that time, he readies planets for harvesting, gathering up souls and knowledge. Your people witnessed it in the early 21st Century of your calendar when King Ghidorah came down from the stars and attacked London." He turned his gaze upon the others. "And even if we could destroy King Ghidorah, the fighting is ongoing. There will always be other abominations from the Far Realm. It's been that way since the beginning, even since the creations of the very first universes that came before this one."

"Do you know why?" Shepard asked. "Why these creatures tend to attack realities like ours."

"That, Commander," began Megellan. "Is a question not even the Array can answer. It is a question that You Know Who has never understood. That is why the Array exists and why Technomancers exists." He looked to Miranda and Jacob. "We're here so we can answer that question for her." _

"Then, if it is information you need," began Miranda. "I can supply with some of what I have on Ceberus. But since we've gone rogue, the Illusive Man has cut much of my accesses to their databases. What all I have now was saved on EDI's hard drives."

"And maybe you can provide us with some information about the Reapers that you learned," said Shepard.

"I intend to give that knowledge freely without any strings," said Kedzuel.

"Good to know."

"However, if any of you wish to have my fleet's help," Kedzuel continued. "Then I do need to ask for resources. Meaning, help us help you."

"Resources," said Telek, finally able to speak after such a long silence of deep thought. "I'm beginning to figure out why Jul went to Cerberus for Reaper tech. Jul and his cult believe that creating technology is a sin, however using technology discovered is not. This explains why his ships were in such disrepair, why he and his men were wearing such broken and beat up armor. They can't build or even repair what they need on their own. They have to go to outside sources."

"Then, the Illusive Man may have found his perfect guinea pig to test what Reaper tech he has found," said Miranda. "And that is where Kai Leng comes in. Leng is providing Jul 'Mdama with Reaper tech to augment his ships and extend the civil war, which will of course keep the Elites divided and weak. After all, I know he was never happy about you or Kiryuu's constantly ruining his plans."

"Or the fact you called for the Illusive Man's head after Lord Hood wasâ€|" said Jacob. He soon cut himself short, swiftly realizing what he was about to say to the Sangheili who thought of Lord Hood as a brother in arms.

"Murdered?" Telek asked. "Yeah, you better believe I want the Illusive Man's head." He ignited his plasma sword. "I am more than

willing to deliver the killing swing."

Kedzuel ignited his technomantic blade clashing it against Telek's own.

"Hey," he said. "Come on!"

Telek parried the blade away from him and then growled furiously at the Blitzardi. His mandibles flapped and quivered. With a snort, the Sangheili shut the emitter off and holstered it upon his hip.

"You didn't know Terrance, Kedzuel," he said. "When that man died, it was like losing Jacob Keyes and A.J. Johnson all over again. He...put a lot of faith in me and he didn't have to."

As Kedzuel let go of his sword, the beam of light vanishing, he placed a hand upon Telek's shoulder.

"I may not have fought that war, but Malcho has never let a single day go by since I got here two years ago where he didn't remind me over and over what it was all about," he said. "And what men like Lord Hood did for Earth."

The big Sangheili's crystal blue eyes narrowed upon Miranda and Jacob.

"So, the Illusive Man wants to make my life a living hell by keeping the Sangheili Civil War up, huh? Makes me wonder if he is helping some of those crazies in the Council to incriminate me, make me look like the heretic that Truth tried to make me look like after I defected."

"I wouldn't put it past him in some ways," said Miranda. "He does like holding grudges. He's about to hold a few against all of us, no doubt."

"Well, at least we have something to go on," said Kedzuel.

Shepard nodded and looked to Miranda: "Can you provide Admiral 'Heros and Emperor Kedzuel with some possible places Jul 'Mdama and his cult are meeting up with Kai Leng, or even any Cerberus operative giving them the tech."

"Yes, ma'am," said Miranda as she clutched her hand, allowing the glowing, orange gauntlet of the Omni Tool to form around her arm. She then stood there, silently waiting for the Blitzardi to call upon his own version of the Omni Tool in order to receive the information she was about to give him. Kedzuel shook his head and held up his hand again with small smile.

"I don't use Omni Tools for transference of information," he said. "However, I can jack my cords into yours and transfer it through there. I don't suppose Cerberus keeps their logs on the Array...encrypted?"

"Cerberus knows that it's possible for other Technomancers to get into things he doesn't want them to see," said Jacob. "So, no. He only uses Technomancers for our combat abilities only. Being able to create a weapon out of energy...from nothing is a skill he appreciates. And the fact that we can knock even the most skilled

Asari biotics off their feet helps too. Teleportation is another.

"And now since we've discovered that the Forerunners also used Technomancy, our skills are becoming even more valuable," said Miranda.

"Forerunners, huh?" Kedzuel asked as the long, glowing tendrils crept across the floor towards Miranda. "You just gave me another piece of the puzzle. Sangheili technology is loosely based around Forerunner tech. There could be a connection."

Miranda held out her arm as the glowing threads attached themselves to the hard light surface of her Omni Tool. She watched upon the small screen just above her forearm as files scrolled downward. Kedzuel's cords flickered, lights pulsating through the silia. Once the transference was complete, the Emperor's cords retracted slowly behind him.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," said Miranda.

"Well," said Shepard. "I think we've learned a lot for one day. You think you can let my ship go now, Your Highness?"

"I can," said Kedzuel with a slight chuckle.

As the meeting had concluded, Shepard escorted her guests to the launching bay. The bay doors were fully open, letting in the light of the golden sun. It spilled upon the shiny, black paneled floors. The air outside smelled sweet, clean. Shepard could see pink blossoms blooming over a small, grassy knoll. Behind, was the edge of a forest filled with what looked to be pale blossoms of cherry trees. Beyond that, she could see a grand palace carved out of a rocky hill, decorated with entwining, gigantic trees and vines. Waterfalls spilled out from the cliff above the palace and emptied into babbling brooks of crystal blue water. She could hear the sounds of birds singing in the trees and she spied a flock of them flying just beyond the bay doors. If Shepard did not know anything of Kethosi architecture, she could have sworn the Precursors had a thing for nature.

Behind her came Garrus, Tali, Jacob, and Miranda. Before they could say their goodbyes, both Kedzuel and Megellan vanished, only to suddenly reappear outside the _Normandy SR-2 _and standing in their true, gigantic size. The ship's bay was now at chest height to the enormous Blitzardi.

"Wow, your species really is gigantic," said Shepard.

"Makes the rest of us look like tiny dolls," said Tali. "And the _Normandy _a toy."

Kedzuel rumbled a chuckle, his broad voice causing the doors of the bay to rattle.

"I would dare to say that you are nearly as big as the _Normandy SR-1," _said Tali.

"Not that big," said Kedzuel. "But my wingspan is close. By your measurements, I'm 79 meters tall. My length from nose to tail is around 127 meters and my wings are nearly twice that."

"Big man," said Shepard. "I'm betting the size is rather handy when fighting Reapers."

"Very much so," said Kedzuel. "Considering many Blitzardi are their size to begin with. To us, fighting Reapers is just like fighting against other warriors rather than shipsâ€¦a few times when we engaged them on planet surfaces, we jump upon their crests, stick our swords in them and slice downward, cutting them in half."

"Wouldn't want to tangle with you in a fight," said Garrus.

"We'd be afraid you'd squash us if you did," said Jacob.

Kedzuel reached out, angling his hand flat so Telek could climb right into his palm. As soon as the Sangheili was safe, Kedzuel backed away.

"Where would you like for me to drop you off, Commander?" the Blitzardi asked.

"Drop me off?" Shepard asked. "What do you mean?"

"My ship can go anywhere within a blink of an eye," said Kedzuel. "Since you are still on the run from the UNSC authorities, I can fold space to an area where you would be less likely found."

Shepard looked behind her to her fellow squadmates: "Got any ideas where we could go?"

"The Terminus System is one spot, Shepard," said Garrus. "It is out of UNSC judicial range, as well as the Council. Though not always the safest place to be, but considering the current state we're in, it's better than nothing."

"I do know where the Terminus System is," Kedzuel said. "Since I've traveled with Alan, I was able to log a visual coordinate of Ilium. I can easily just take you there."

Garrus shook his head: "Bad idea. A lot of people...especially people we don't want seeing the _Normandy_ might be able to spot us there."

"I am afraid that is the only visual coordinate I have," said Kedzuel.

"You just can't plot a course and go to a system, or even an empty piece of space?" Tali asked.

"No," said Kedzuel. "Folding space is a little bit more complicated than that. I need a visual coordinate, images, a landmark so I can guide the _Shi'lithra_ to it."

"Can you just pick just pick a system?" asked Shepard.

"No," replied Kedzuel. "I have to have a visual landmark. Usually, it is best that it be a planet. No two planets look alike, so it is

easier to navigate."

"If this ship can in fact be undetectable by virtually any scanner known to the galaxy," began Tali. "Then, why not...um...fold space to Ilium and then drop us off just outside it's oort cloud? No one usually watches from there."

"I suppose the gravity wells from the debris may be able to keep you hidden when I leave," said Kedzuel. "I could do that."

"Just whatever you do," began Telek. "Don't make me sick again when you move the ship."

"No promises."

"I thought not."

Kedzuel raised a claw and the reddening sky suddenly turned pitch black. Tiny stars filled the sky, twinkling like diamonds in the blackness. A singular light in the far off distance grew brighter and brighter as the stars themselves streaked across the sky. The sea green and blue surface of Ilium zoomed swiftly into view, its disk filling half of the sky inside the ship. Kedzuel grinned as he heard the sound of a few gasping from his captive audience. The _Shi'lithra _came into a slow orbit above the planet, though it went undetected by any of the ground scanners.

"Here we are," said Kedzuel.

"That was fast," said Jacob.

"Very fast," said Miranda. "Blink and you're there."

Cargo ships floated through the landscape of the pocket dimension inside Kedzuel's massive ship, completely unaware that they had done so.

"My ship mostly has to remain phased," said Kedzuel. "It is quite dangerous to just suddenly appear out of nowhere and who knows what may have collided with us. Normally, I would contact terminals below, advising them to move their ships out of the way so that mine can return to reality without getting anyone stuck it the hull."

"That is still something else," said Shepard.

Kedzuel pulled up a cyan hues holographic vector of the Tasale and its six planets. Above in the sky, Ilium began to shrink as the ship backed away. Within mere seconds they passed the third planet, and then the fourth, and the fifth, and at last the sixth. The ship entered the oort cloud just as a misshapen dwarf planet passed across the sky above. Kedzuel opened his own scanners, searching for any signs of who was watching. Once he felt satisfied that he could safely phase the ship back into reality, he did so.

"Alright," he said. "We are back in three dimensional space."

"I don't feel any different," said Shepard.

"You're not supposed to."

Tali pointed at the palace a ways from the grassy plain: "That cannot be your house."

Kedzuel turned slightly just to peak beyond his wing: "It is."

"You have a palace inside a ship!" Tali called, breaking with disbelief, or perhaps envy. "And forests, and mountains, and streams, water, birds. A sun, a sky. Wind. You have wind in here. Where does your crew live?"

"Some of them live in the palace," said Kedzuel. "Most live in the crew apartments surrounding the palace. Though not as fancy, they are very comfortable, and...by your standards...more spacious and lavish. We care about comfort on my ship. Less chances of mutiny that way."

"Ack, don't ever say 'mutiny' to a Quarian," said Tali.

"It's considered a bad word among them," said Shepard.

Kedzuel dipped his head: "So sorry, I didn't mean to insult. I just meant, the comfortable quarters help boost morale among the crew."

"I know my morale would very high if I could manage a walk through the woods," said Garrus. "While serving on the ship that houses those woods."

"Well, perhaps when we meet again," Kedzuel began. "I can take you on a tour some time. Maybe showing your fellow Quarians the interior of my ship might help bring the Migrant Fleet into helping us."

"They would say it is a very pretty ship," said Tali. "But I know many of them wouldn't want you to attempt to build these pocket universes for their ships, Your Highness. We Quarians have a very low immune system, even having plants around us can be a bit disastrous."

"I can understand," said Kedzuel. "I suppose living in a sterile environment does weaken the helpful cells needed to fight off infections and viruses. I don't know what my scientists can do for you, since we know nothing at this time of Quarian biology, I have heard of the state of your homeworld. As I promised Wrex, I could attempt to refurbish yours as well after the war, Ms Vas Normandy."

"Easily done," said Megellan. "And if I had cell samples to study, I could have our medical experts figure out ways of strengthening your immune system. It must be very uncomfortable living in an environment suit all the time."

"I'm used to it," said Tali. "But it is not pleasant. I'll think on that."

"Promising more gifts?" asked Shepard. "The war's not won yet, Your Highness."

"It is certainly not," said Kedzuel. "Anything you'd like as well, Mr. Vakarian?"

"It's Garrus," he said. "And nothing personal. Palaven is still habitable, we've got all we need. I just want to make sure you'll be ready to fight when the Reapers get here. Can Palaven count on a few of your ships to help out?"

"Of course they can," said Kedzuel. "After speaking with the Citadel Council, Valern sent a few of my requests to the Primarch on Palaven. And they've sent me a listing of a few uninhabited worlds I might be able to mine for Black Lake. Actually found a very large deposit on Aventen and we're currently scraping it off now, after getting permission of course."

"Aventen?" asked Garrus. "There's nothing on that planet. We Turians mined that one clean ages ago."

"Nothing you could have used," said Kedzuel. "But much similar to Earth's rather massive deposit of Black Lake, Adventen's mantle has veins of the stuff. I think one of my geologists called it a Black Lake gold mine and we've kicked ourselves for not discovering it sooner."

"Well, if the Primarch isn't all that bothered about you Precursors excavating it, it's fine by me."

"We are still sticking to the plan of only mining on either uninhabited worlds or worlds that have very little habitation on them," said Megellan. "Since Black Lake mining tends to cause major ecological damage to the planet. Earthquakes, multiple volcanic eruptions, and if the planet has oceans, massive tsunamis."

"Big reason why we've stopped mining operations on Earth," said Kedzuel. "Instead we've switched over to a few moons around Uranus. They've got better deposits." His eyes roved back to Commander Shepard. "It was nice to finally meet you after the stories I've heard."

"Same here," Shepard said with a swift nod.

"I hope we can keep in touch at least."

"Love to, but right now isn't the best idea for that," said Shepard. "I'd hate to be chatting with you and all of a sudden the UNSC discovered my location. I do intend to turn myself in, but only after I've dropped off my crew into safe locations first."

Kedzuel and Megellan backed away from the ship and then politely bowed.

"Da'i shijou han," Kedzuel said as he leaned back up. "It means fair travels in Blitzardi."

"Good luck, Commander," said Telek. "Just be careful. My fleet won't tell anyone you were here, but that don't mean that it's safe to relax."

"I know that, sir," said Shepard as she clicked her heels and saluted. "Thank you, Admiral." Her eyes returned to Kedzuel. "And take care of Liara, Your Highness. Tell her I asked about her."

"I shall," said Kedzuel. "Speed on."

_ "Alright, everybody get inside before this boat takes off," _called Joker from the comm. _ "If you're not inside in two seconds, it's sailin' without you!" _

"We're in, Joker," said Shepard.

_ "Aye, aye, Commander." _

The hatch closed slowly. A flicker of energy fluctuated around the _Normandy _as the shielding around it vanished. The ship powered its thrusters and streaked through the sky. Kedzuel dipped his head and a flicker of blue light appeared against the sky, guiding the _Normandy _safely out of the inclosed universe within his ship. The moment they finally existed the _Shi'lithra_, Joker could at last get a view of Kedzuel's ship. Behind him, Commander Kaelyn Shepard came walking with Tali and Garrus.

"Take a look at that, Commander," said Joker. "Now _that _is a _dreadnaught._"

"It's too big to be a _dreadnaught," _ said Garrus. "That ship is in a class all its own."

The _Normandy _glided down across the black, slick, shiny, sharp angular surfaces and impossible geometric architecture that gave shape to the _Shi'lithra_. There were curves along the ship that no current space-faring species could even create. Speckles of light flickered across the surface, energy zipped and zapped upon thin needles jutting forth from the sea of black. The _Normandy _looked like nothing more than a speck of dust amid the goliath _Shi-class juggernaut._

"It is beautiful," said Tali. "Twenty of those ships could house every Quarian on the Flotilla. And have room to spare."

"He has more of those ships," said Garrus. "Isn't that what we got from the report?"

"Lots more," said Shepard. "Each one specifically designed to destroy Reapers."

"Kinda makes me just want to step back and let them handle it," said Joker. "And watch the fun from the sidelines."

"They did it that way, Joker," said Shepard. "And civilizations died, mostly because of them, as Kedzuel said. No one was involved with the destruction of the Reapers except for them, and they caused just as many extinctions as the Reapers. I think it's better we do it this way, have them work with us. It will save a lot of lives. This is our galaxy." She looked behind to Garrus and Tali. "All of our galaxy."

"Normandy _are you at a safe distance away now?" _ chimed in Kedzuel's voice from the speakers.

"Roger that, _Shi'lithra_," said Joker. "You are cleared for departure."

_ "Thank you. Take care." _

At last the whole body of the _Shi'lithra _could be seen through the forward glass in front of Joker's pilot chair. Blue-white ribbons of energy laced across the black surface.

"I think he's going to give us a view of what folding space looks like when he's ship is not phased," said Garrus.

"Folding space," said EDI. "His ship can warp spacetime itself, bring the destination he wishes to go to him, instead him going to it. Such a method has always been theorized by scientists, but never been proven or seen. This should be quite educational."

As the energy intensified across the hull of the ship, the _Shi'lithra _appeared from the _Normandy_ as stretched, farther and farther to infinity, coalescing upon a singular point off in the distance. For what Shepard could tell, the ship seemed to be a rubber band in space, stretched out to its maximum. When the tension had reached its peak, the aft part of the ship zipped way, faster than the human eye could catch. To Shepard and Joker, the ship just winked out.

"I have logged the phenomenon in my database," said EDI. "As I had stated, it _was _educational."

"That is a fast ship," said Tali said, finally able to breathe after witnessing something even her people believed to be an impossibility.

"Nah," said Joker. "I bet the _Shi'lithra_ has really bad maneuverability. But she can certainly leave in style." He turned his seat around to Shepard. "I must say though, it was awfully nice of the Emperor of the Known Universe to leave us in a system with a Mass Relay."

"Certainly was," said Shepard. "Set course to it."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

9. IX

IX

**1103 september 12 2560 (Military Time)\Unknown location/shadow of darkness**

Telek 'Heros took in a deep, contemplative breath as his crystal blue eyes scanned across the surface of a strange, but familiar planet. Eerie blue speckled lines etched and carved alien curvatures and haunting angular geometry. He knew what he was looking at for he came across such a planets before, but this one held a special place in his thoughts.

Telek 'Heros had returned to Requiem, the Forerunner Shield Installation that gifted him with the horrifying truth.

Requiem was an ancient structure that housed much of the Forerunner's culture, their knowledge, their technological secrets. Telek was ordered here by his former superior, then Supreme Commander Otto

'Gamamee. Though deep inside, because of it's significance, he knew he would one day return to it. Kedzuel's ship, the _Shi'lithra, _followed the long, and rather confusing trail of the Technomancer working for Cerberus. All he and Megellan could find were ghosts in the streams, shadows, echoes. They came upon an old and abandoned Cerberus station and barely could gleam an answer from its database. Kedzuel was nearly all but discourage in trying to find Kai Leng, that is until Tele began to read what Shri downloaded from the Covenant Remnant base on New Llanelli.

One word made his blood run cold, "Requiem". Telek then knew what it was that Jul was after. He wanted _her._ He wanted her knowledge, her gifts of Forerunner technology. He wanted to use her to finally win the favor of the Council, buy loyalty, and return the Sangheili back down the dark path that nearly destroyed them the first time. With her help, Jul 'Mdama would have his end of the Civil War, the way he would only see it, with himself at the top. With Telek, Otto, and possibly even Rtas banished for their heresy, or even executed.

Telek hoped beyond hope that someone like Jul would ever discover Requiem and its secrets. Only himself, the Prophets, and Otto knew of its location. However, only Telek knew its truth. He tried so much to tell Otto after he discovered what the Halos could do, what he found on Requiem. But the truth itself was too much and Otto turned against Telek, turning him in and watch him be branded a heretic for the bravery of wanting to save his own people before the Covenant would turn into a suicide cult.

His heart sank as he mulled over what sort of truths Jul could discover and then warp for his own purposes. Telek bowed his head, his mandibles shut tightly as his hands curled tightly into fists. The chilling fear of seeing Requiem again soon turned into boiling rage. His rubbery, gray-brown skin darkened as his face flushed, his temples pounding with every thought. Then, his rage was tempered when he felt a sharp cold sensation grazing under his armor.

Telek slowly turned to find a ghostly, glimmering form of a Western Dragon with silvery scales and bluish, striped markings. He finally was able to unclinch his teeth and he relaxed.

_"This place seems important to you," _said the ghostly apparition of Dunkelzahn, his words pushed their way with concern into Telek's mind. _"Have you been here before?"_

"A long time ago," he said. "Requiem. I was sent here to gather maps and artifacts that would lead the Covenant to the Halos and of course to the Great Journey, godhood, and salvation. It was a secret mission. So very few knew of it. The Prophet Hierarchs oversaw my travels." He paused and a smile curled up as he slowly brought forth those memories. "Otto was so proud that Truth named me as the one to come to such aâ€¦sacred place."

"I remember what Pandora looked like," Dunkelzahn began. _"A Shield Installation as you called it. Does this one have Flood as well?"_

"No," said Telek. "The Forerunners wouldn't dare to house such creatures here. They experimented on the Flood, but far away from important centers such as this. No, this Installation holds something

else."

"What does it hold?"

"More like _who_," said Telek. "You'll see in a moment. But I will say this, Dunkelzahn. This place was where I lost faith in the gods I worshipped for so long. This is where I became an atheist and a heretic."

Dunkelzahn slowly floated down until he laid upon his belly, curling his neck around Telek. The ghostly Great Western Dragon rustled his wings as he shifted around. Chilly vapors of his ectoplasm billowed around Telek's feet.

_"This is the place where you discovered that the Halos were weapons of mass destruction," _he said.

"No, not weapons, sterilizers just in case the Flood became too unmanageable," said the Sangheili. "Their last desperate attempt atâ€|according to Kedzuelâ€|proving that they were the true Protectors of the Galaxy. I almost wanna think that making such a bright flash in the sky from the Precursor homeworld, it was the Forerunner's way of showing them just what it was they were made of. But, no, stupid arrogance. They killed themselves and my species almost made the same mistake." Telek lifted his hand to the left side of his chest, covering the spot where he had been branded. "I tried to warn them, and I was marked for my trouble. With the end of the war with the UNSC, I thought my fellow brothers and sisters, my people, would finally wizen up to the truth. The Forerunners weren't gods. They never were. Requiem provided me with various maps of all the Halos and of course the Forerunner Text I had stored in my old ship. It even gave me the answer to why humanity was so important. Finding out that Truth had lied to us about humanity's importanceâ€|that they were the inheritors of all of thisâ€|was just icing on the cake. I think Kedzuel's people and the truth that the Forerunners were nothing more than thievesâ€|wellâ€|that was the cherry on my sundae." His gaze returned to the planet. "But even with the truth shown to him, Jul 'Mdama will not listen. Holding Requiem will only draw more support to his cause, make him a prophet among my people practically. And he'll continue to make everyone believe that the Reapers are some scare tactic thought up by that old mad Telek 'Heros and blame whatever troubles Sanghelios has on me." Telek chuckled. "Did you know that many Sangheili thought of me as the Covenant version of the Antichrist? I would lead them astray from the path, send them into Hellâ€|have my demons devour their souls and such. That's what they believed."

_"I'd never peg you for the type to do such a thing," _Dunkelzahn said with a smirk.

"Well, it's true," said Telek. "And here I am again, the Devil who would lead them away from the path."

_"Well, if it matters," _began Dunkelzahn. _"I think my presence on board that Covenant Remnant ship cemented their belief in your demonic powers, Telek."_

Telek chuckled: "Good. I'm glad you scared the piss outta them. I hope you'd scare some sense into them, but Jul and his cult are beyond reason."

_"I am afraid I'm no miracle worker on that, Telek," _said Dunkelzahn. _"You are a better miracle worker than I am."_

"Don't sell yourself too short, Casper," said Telek as he turned away from the planet, walking slowly around the ghostly dragon. Dunkelzahn got up to slowly float along side the Sangheili.

"I need a favor from you," Telek continued, turning to the dragon.

"What is it?"

"Well, I need to ensure this plan goes on without a hitch," he said. "Jul 'Mdama must not be killed. Under no circumstances should he be killed off. A martyr would make things a lot worse especially with a culture who's heavily religious."

_"Of course," _said Dunkelzahn.

"So, I need you to make a sweep through, taking out all the guards one by one," he said.

_"Well, that makes things easy," _said Dunkelzahn.

"That's the point," said Telek. "I don't want to be given the chance that I may have to take his life by firing through his guards. I want this to be simple, to be easy. And I want it to be quick. They can't hurt you. They can fire at you all they want and they can't even land a single kill upon you. Why? You're already dead."

_"Though wouldn't that cement the whole Telek is a demon summoner thing?" _Dunkelzahn asked. He swirled around Telek then settled himself in front of the Sangheili, his glowing tendrils grazing across Telek's back. _"It was fine when only a few bridge crew knew about me, but we are talking about a whole cult now."_

"I knew this would someday come," said Telek with a heavy sigh. "Dunkelzahn, I can't keep hiding you from Otto or Rtas anymore. And I can't keep hiding you from the Council either. I'll just have to tell them the truth. I have former-President Kiryuu Knight's dead predecessor as a member of my crew."

_"I would love to hear how they might react to that," _said Dunkelzahn as he dipped his head. _"You'll have to explain what a Free Spirit is."_

"No, I'll let you fill in that bit," said Telek. "I mean, surely by now, Otto and Rtas have figured out just how odd Earth happens to be. I know Otto already had an inkling to it when he met Lofwyr."

_"Yes, I recall Shri telling me about that," _said Dunkelzahn with an amused chuckle. _"And how she pretty much wrapped him around her finger as well. I suppose these times has softened Lofwyr. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."_

"And since Otto and Rtas are staying at Kiryuu's summer home," began Telek. "I have no doubt they've seen all the pretty Troll and Changeling women he's got as his personal secretaries and servants."

_"I never understood what Kiryuu's fascination for those particular metahumans was," _said Dunkelzahn.

"Wasn't his chauffeur formally Miss Ute Nation?"

_"No, she was Miss Pueblo Corporate Council," _replied Dunkelzahn.

"Hard to tell the difference," said Telek. "I suppose that's why I willingly stayed away from Earth. You Earthlings are just a little too strange."

_"I like to think that we were special," _said Dunkelzahn.

"Well, they're going to be asking questions, and I figured the one who was one of the biggest movers and shakers of the Sixth World might be able to level with the Council," said Telek. "Besides, when I put Jul on trial for his stupidity, I want all my crew to be there. Including you."

Telek start off again, leaving Dunkelzahn to pause upon what he had said. The Great Western Dragon Free Spirit lifted a paw to his chin and gave it a scratch in thought. Then, his glimmering eyes lit up and a smile spread across his face. Dunkelzahn swept across the iridescent purple floor, swiftly catching up with the Sangheili.

_"And here, I thought you didn't like me," _he said.

"You annoy the hell outta me, Casper," said Telek. "But I don't give nicknames to my enemies. You're no A.J. Johnson, but you have your own thing. You helped me find Kiryuu, and you helped me twice when facing down King Ghidorah. I would have lost myself if it weren't for you."

He paused and turned to peer up at the ghostly dragon with a soft smile.

"Look, I may rough you up a bit, Dunkelzahn, but don't think I hate you," he said. "I know dragons tend to be a bitâ€|pissy if someone smart mouths them."

_"Some," _said Dunkelzahn. _"But I'm lucky to have been born with a sense of humor. Besides, how can I get mad at the one that made one of my little fantasies come true." _

"Oh, yeah? Which one was that?"

Dunkelzahn dipped his head and smiled: _"Ever since I awoke in the Sixth World, I sat and watched all sorts of TV shows, movies, streaming videos on the Matrix. Pop culture. That was my thing. My hoard before I died, was filled with all manner of memorabilia from pop culture. One look at it and you wouldn't even think it was a dragon's hoard, but some nerdy fanboy's stash he had stored in his grandmother's basement." _

"I kinda figured you'd be a nerd."

_"I was a big one," _said Dunkelzahn. _"I even screamed when I met

George Lucas before he passed on. But mourned that I Gene Roddenberry had passed away before I awoke. Outside of having the usual gold and jewels that made me pretty much the richest dragon on the planet, I had toys and comics. Well, Kiryuu supplied me with the Star Wars Trilogy, not the prequels. He said they weren't all that good. And he gave me Star Trek movies and Flash Gordon comics. I sat down and watched Mystery Science Theater 3000 and I kicked myself for not figuring out a way to stay awake during the Fifth Age like Malcho and Manda did. I wanted to live during the 60s and 70s, wearing tie-dyed shirts and leather fringe, have the big hair and baggy pants of the 80s and 90s. But I missed all of that. Which is one of the reasons why my Will granted a wish to anyone still alive when John Lennon was killed. Because I've always wanted to shake a man like that's hand. But magic prevented me from really being a part of that world. So, during the 50 years that I was awake for the beginning of the Sixth, I made it my thing to just collect all I could from the four decades of wonder that I missed. And I spoke to all sorts of people who lived during it. I talked to 30-somethings who were children during the 80s and then teens during the 90s. I even bought me a pair of those platform shoes with the gold fish in the heels. Fake gold fish of course."_

Telek started to laugh.

_"But what captured me were the movies," _said Dunkelzahn. _"I made it a habit to watch all sorts of movies. And again, one of my favorites was Star Wars. I always wanted to be on board the _Millennium Falcon _and travel through the stars with the space pirate Hans Solo and Chewbacca. But those were the movies. Then, I met you, Telek. You were a space pirate, you fought against an evil empire yourself, you overthrew an emperor of sorts who wanted to slaughter an entire species."_

Telek grinned, wagging his head: "So, you thought I was Hans Solo, huh?"

_"Well, not exactly, but you are as close as the real deal I could ever meet, Telek," _said Dunkelzahn. _"And here I am, serving on a pirate ship in space. Battling evil space creatures and cultists. And I have you to thank for that."_

Telek crossed his arms: "You're right, Dunkelzahn. You really are a big nerd. The biggest nerd I've ever met. Me? Hans Solo? Alright. I can dig that. But I'm afraid I don't do a good Harrison Ford impression. Most humans equated me to a space Robin Hood, though."

_"You're still a pirate who steals for a good cause," _said Dunkelzahn.

"Used to," said Telek. "I don't do that anymore. But I might again if the Council votes in Jul's favor. And I have a feeling Otto and Rtas might be joining my little merry band of pirates."

_"Well, you know you have my support," _said Dunkelzahn.

"I'm glad for that," said Telek. "Well, as your 'captain' I want you to prepare for this mission. Like I said, I do want to make this easy. We need to get to Jul 'Mdama as quickly as we can with little casualties as possible."

"Casualties?"

"I mean us, Casper," said Telek. "And Jul as well. If you get to him before Kedzuel and I do, then immobilize him as best as you can."

_"That I can do," _said Dunkelzahn. _"However, I do wish this was taking place closer to Earth's Manasphere. I can do a lot more than that if I was near it."_

"We don't always get to pick our battlegrounds," said Telek. "Sometimes we just have to work with what we got. Quite frankly I'm glad you're a ghost considering what I heard when you dragons attempt to leave Earth. You're not very useful being comatose."

_"Malcho and Manda are the only dragons who can leave the Manasphere without going into Shal-Mora," _said Dunkelzahn. _"And my current incorporeal state also keeps me from falling into Shal-Mora as well. Doesn't mean I wouldn't be aware of what was going on. It just means I can't move."_

Telek nodded: "You know what you can do best to see this plan through, Dunkelzahn. I'm leaving that up to you. Just remember don't kill Jul 'Mdama."

_"But you are going down there with me," _he said.

"Yep," said Telek. "There's things I need to gather from Requiem. And when I'm down there, I'll show you how I found out about the Covenant lie. Kedzuel already figured out a piece of the puzzle when he forced a connection on me to get us to New Llanelli."

He turned as he heard the soft clack clack of boots walking across the decorative floor of the interior of the _Shadow of Darkness_. Telek watched as Emperor Kedzuel walked slowly towards them, dressed fully in his silvery and ornate armor. Tucked under his arm was his helm. His heavy, armored cloak covered his folded wings.

"My warriors are ready," he said. "I've discovered where this Kai Leng fellow happens to be. He is quite close to Jul 'Mdama. However, my ship's sensors have also picked up a lot of Reaper tech on that planet and Cerberus agents along with Jul 'Mdama."

"Figures as much," said Telek. "The Illusive Man isn't the kinda guy who likes failure." He leaned back and crossed his arms. "He would make sure whatever plan they've cooked up is going smoothly. I just wish I'd know what it was. We couldn't get much from the data we downloaded. Anything Cerberus related came complete with a nasty self-destruct virus. Glad I opted to read the drive on a closed computer system far from being connected to my own ship."

"Well, Supreme Commander, you are in charge," said Kedzuel. "My men and myself follow your orders since you know what we're up against. So, what's the plan?"

_"I am going down there first," _said Dunkelzahn. _"And make a nice little clean sweep of the area so all of you can get to Jul 'Mdama and Kai Leng safely."_

"Isn't that cheating?" asked Kedzuel.

"Says the giant anthro-dragon with the Jedi powers and direct communication with Crystal Dragon Jesus," said Telek with a smirk.

Kedzuel dipped his head, grinning and admitting defeat:
"TouchÃ©."

Telek whipped out his modified magnum and spun it upon his finger:
"Well, let's go. Casper, get down there and begin your little sweep. They won't know what hit them."

With that, Dunkelzahn's form faded away. Telek holstered his magnum and walked over to Kedzuel.

"The first part is well, Dunkelzahn clears the way," he said. "You know we can't kill Jul."

"The martyr thing you're worried about."

"Right," said Telek. "But I know for a fact that Earth Technomancers can do some nasty things to Free Spirits. I've seen too many trideos of Kiryuu Knight and Manda mucking things up for the Treaty City just because Ghostwalker pissed them off one too many times to know Dunkelzahn will be needing our help. And since there ain't any Technomancy Masters on Earth outside of Kiryuu, Manda, and Malcho, this Kai Leng joker shouldn't be a problem for you to deal with."

"And considering he has a limited time to stay connected to the Array," said Kedzuel. "While I do not."

"That too," said Telek. "I can provide some back up with my caster, but it ain't no substitute for the genuine article. Let me handle Jul, though. And since there's Reaper junk down there, we'll need to gather it up for proof."

"Agreed," said Kedzuel.

"Well, let's do it," said Telek. "No time like the presence. Casper's waitin' on us."

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file.